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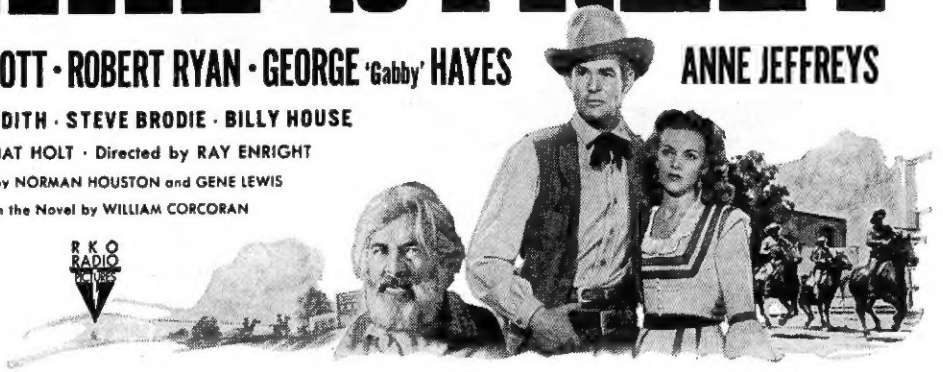

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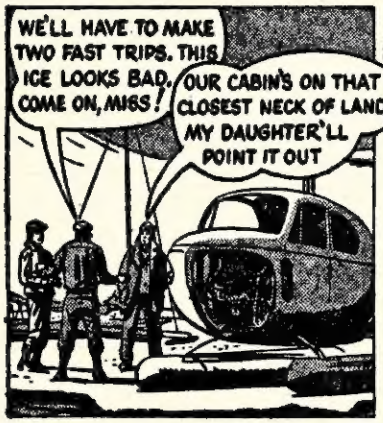
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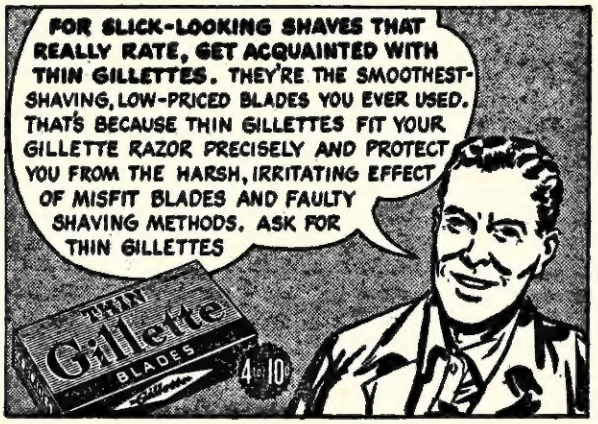
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Vol. XIV, No. 3 CONTENTS April, 1947

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All Stories New—No Reprints

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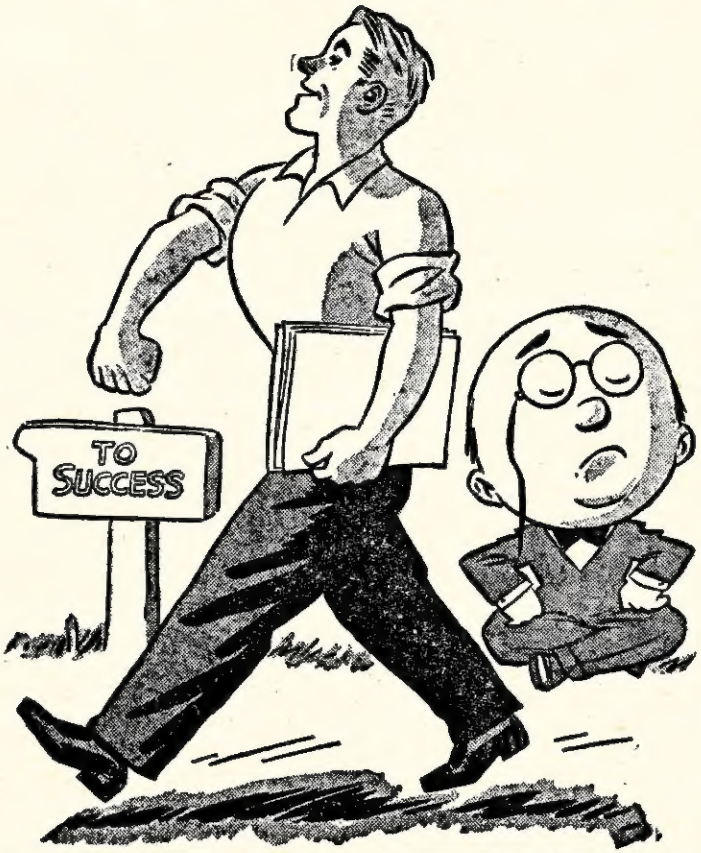

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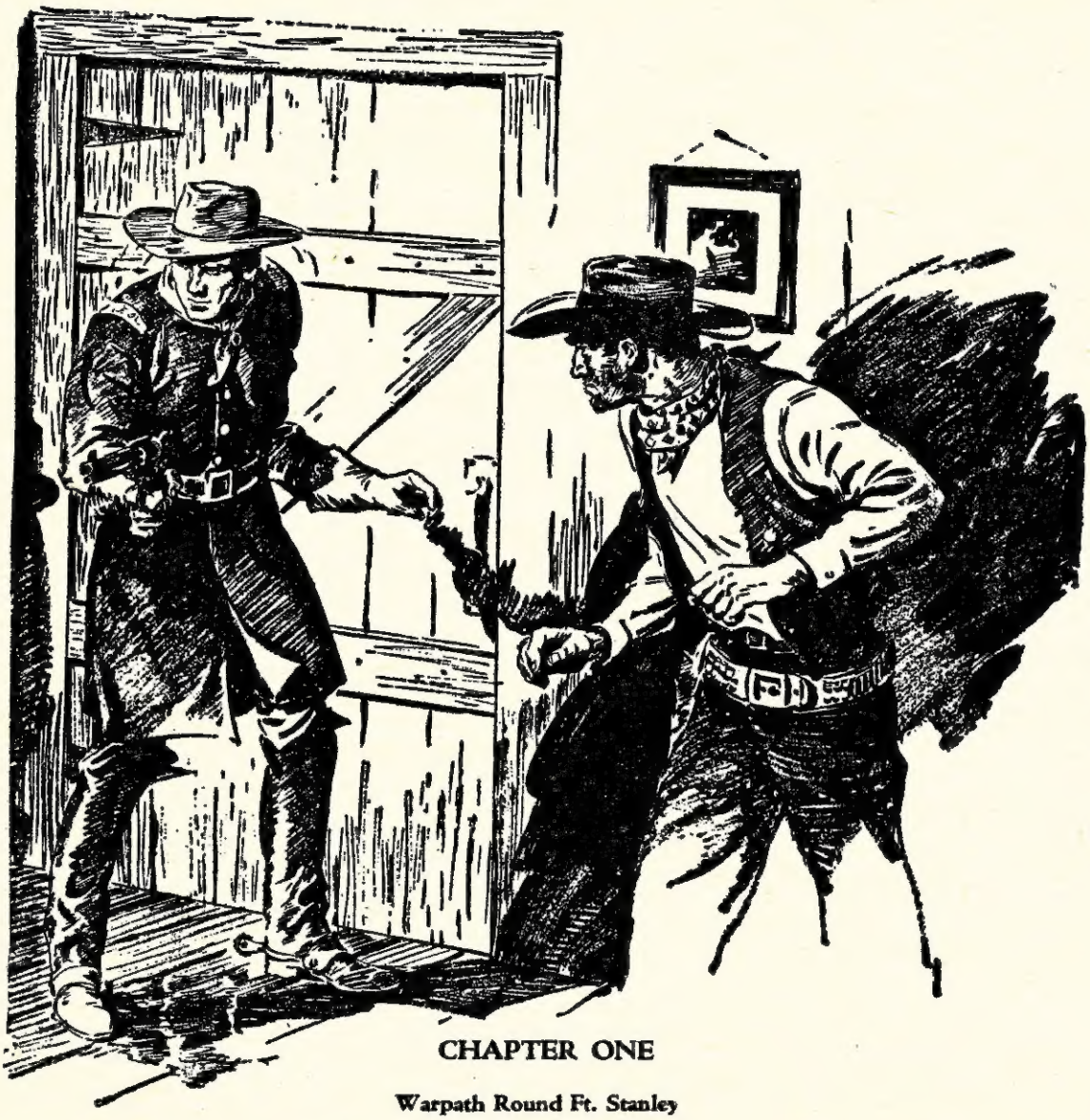
LAST RIDE OF THE BOOTHILL TROOPERS

Who formed that grisly company called the Ghost Patrol, that nightly rode the ridges around Fort Stanley? Were they, in truth, the spirits of Captain Andy Bennett and his six men, whose bullet-shattered corpses had been found, scalped and murdered — returned to ride the lonely rounds of their last tour of duty? Or were they the living embodiment of the saying: "Good troopers never die?"

The two men at the table rose in horror as the door opened and Capt. Bennett — or his ghost—walked in, leveling a sixgun at them.

Action Frontier Novel

By PHILIP KETCHUM



CHAPTER ONE

Warpath Round Ft. Stanley

HE RODE into Webber from Fort Stanley that afternoon and after making his purchases at the store he stopped by at the High Tower saloon for a drink. The bar was crowded, for this was a Saturday and a good many of the farmers from the Coaga Lake district were in town. Two, whom he knew, invited him to join them and one of them presented him to a third man, a fellow named Darby.

"This is Captain Andy Bennett," said the farmer. "An' he's all right, even if he is in uniform. If you ever have any trouble with the Injuns, talk it over with Captain Andy."

"I've got a way to handle Injuns," Darby replied. "A perfect way to handle 'em."

As he said that he touched the gun which was stuck in the waist-band of his trousers and a heavy scowl darkened his face.

"A good many people don't understand the Indians," Bennett said slowly. "This was their country and we are taking it away from them. That's a hard thing to face but the Indian chiefs have faced it and most of their people have. A few of the younger men are resentful and get out of hand, especially when loaded down with white man's liquor."

"What color is your skin, captain?"

asked a low questioning voice behind him.

Bennett turned and found himself staring into the darkly handsome face of Lou Endicott. There was a mocking smile on Endicott's lips. He was a tall man, broad shouldered, still young. And he was an important man around here. He owned this saloon, a half interest in the store and grubstake interest in a good many of the diggings in Willupa canyon.

"Well, captain?" he asked again.

"As white as yours, Endicott," Bennett said bluntly.

Endicott shrugged his shoulders. "Sometimes I wonder about that. Sometimes I'm not so sure. What we need in this country is an army policy with guts. We don't need smart young captains to wetnurse a bunch of savages."

There was quite a crowd standing around to hear this and a good many of the men nodded their approval. Bennett knew that his face was flushed with anger. It took all the strength he had to hold himself under control. A captain in the United States Army didn't walk into a saloon and get involved in a brawl. This was something he had to take. And he had only himself to thank for it. Even the commanding officer at Fort Stanley didn't agree with him in his attitude toward the Indians.

"Could I buy you a drink, captain?" Endicott asked quietly. "A drink of milk, perhaps?"

Bennett shook his head. "I live under certain regulations, Endicott. One of them prevents me from striking a civilian while I am in uniform but none of them force me to drink with a man. You will have to excuse me."

"You could take off the uniform," said Endicott sharply.

"Someday," Bennett answered, "I will."

He turned abruptly toward the door as he said that, angled toward the tie-rail where he had left his horse. He was a man close to thirty, tall, slender and with an erect carriage born of a dozen years in uniform. His thin, clean shaven face was deeply tanned and his eyes, now, were stormy. He was not new to the Indian country or Indian troubles. He had served in Arizona under General Crook and in the Department of the Platte. He had been transferred here two years before and had been here long enough to become familiar with the problems in the north west. He hadn't looked on the problems here as being too serious. A reservation had been set aside for these Indians and the Army faced only the task of persuading them to go. This might involve a year of discussions or even longer but a peaceful evacuation of the Indians was much to be preferred over a military campaign against them.

AFTER a time, Andy Bennett mounted his horse and continued along the main street toward the edge of town. He passed several Indians, Snakes, riding into Webber and, recognizing one of them, a short, heavy-set, scowling man known as Prince Henry, he raised his hand in greeting. The Indian made no acknowledgment of this at all and neither did his companions. They looked straight at Bennett, straight through him, and rode on into town.

The frown Andy Bennett was wearing deepened. He had a feeling that if the Indians initiated any trouble at all, men like Prince Henry would be back of it. Prince Henry was young and was bitter toward the whites and he had a certain following among the Indians who would heed him before they listened to their chief, Tuala Jack.

Bennett pulled up at the edge of town in front of a small, log-slab house and before he reached the door it was opened by Mrs. Jerome. She was a woman in her late forties, still attractive, cheerful.

"Come right in, Captain," she invited. "You've picked a poor night to come to supper but you might as well get used to Myra's cooking."

Andy Bennett laughed. He stepped into the front room, immediately feeling at home. Myra came in from the kitchen and he held her in his arms for a moment and kissed her. She stepped back, flushed, and lifting her hands to her hair. She was a tall girl, slender and dark eyed. She had some of her mother's warm and generous nature and the sharp wit and quick temper of her father, who, at the present time, was at the diggings in Willupa canyon.

"It's a good meal you'll have," she said to Bennett, "and you'd better like it. Even if you don't you'd better say you do."

Bennett shook his head. "I can't stay,

Myra. I just stopped by before riding back to the fort. The old man wants to see me tonight."

Myra showed an immediate interest. "Something important."

"I don't know. If you asked the old man he would say it was."

Mrs. Jerome frowned. She said, "Andy, will there be an Indian uprising? Will there be any serious trouble?"

"I hope not," Bennett answered slowly. "There shouldn't be."

"But there could be."

"Bill was in town the day before yesterday," said Mrs. Jerome, speaking of her husband. "He said there had been trouble at the diggings between some of the miners and some Indians who had been hired to help out in the work. He said there was talk everywhere of an Indian war."

"There is talk, of course," Bennett nodded. "And some Indians and some white men would welcome trouble, but Tuala Jack wants peace and so do most of his men. So do most of the other tribes."

"Something's burning," Myra said suddenly, and hurried toward the kitchen. Mrs. Jerome laughed.

"At the most serious times, things like this happen," she said to Bennett. "I sometimes think that little tragedies are a boon to mankind. Sit down, Andy."

Captain Andy Bennett shook his head. "I can't, Mrs. Jerome. Really I can't. I'm due back at the Fort right now."

He moved over to the kitchen door and watched Myra at the stove, realizing abruptly all it had meant to him to meet Myra and her mother and father and to be welcomed into this home. It had smoothed the rough edges from his nature and had given a point to his life, more real than any he had ever had before.

FORT STANLEY was five miles from Webber and there was a cold wind on this late October afternoon. The sky was gray with clouds and the smell of rain was in the air. There was snow on the surrounding mountains and there would soon be more of it.

Bennett didn't hurry. The commanding officer had asked him to come to headquarters before retreat and there was still plenty of time. He didn't think he was going to be sent on a patrol. A routine patrol was generally commanded by one of the junior officers. A Captain wouldn't draw such an assignment unless quite a large force was being sent out on some definite mission. It was more likely, Bennett felt, that the old man just wanted to discuss the Indian situation, generally.

He stabled his horse at the Fort, stopped briefly at his quarters, and then reported to General Merrill. The General was a big man, broad shouldered, heavy. He was close to retirement age and he had no liking for his assignment here. He was bald, grouchy and given to sudden outbursts of temper which he made no apparent effort to control. One Indian, to him, was like another and none were trustworthy. He had little respect for Captain Andrew J. Bennett, the senior officer he had inherited with his command here. Bennett knew this and so did the other officers and most of the command and half of the white men in the district. It had made Bennett's position almost untenable. It had made him think, often, of requesting a transfer.

"Sit down, Bennett. Sit down," the General said, irritably. "Smoke if you feel like it."

Bennett took one of the stiff, straight backed chairs near the General's desk. He reached for his pipe and filled it, tamping in the tobacco slowly.

"Tuala Jack," said the General. "Where is he? Have you any idea?"

"He's up in the hills above Coaga lake, I suppose," Bennett answered. "One of the main Snake settlements is up there."

"You think he wants peace?"

"I'm sure of it."

"And maybe you think he'll lead his people to the reservation without a fight?"

"I think there's a chance of it."

The General got to his feet and paced back and forth across the room, scowling. "They think so in Washington, too," he said finally. "They're sending some stupid civilian out here to talk to Tuala Jack. He's representing the Indian Bureau. They call him a Peace Commissioner." The General snorted. "They've gone crazy back there in Washington. We don't need a civilian Peace Commissioner out here. We need another thousand federal troops."

Bennett made no answer. This was the best news he had heard for a long time.

"I've got orders," said the General,

"just to keep the peace until this wise bird gets out of here. Can you imagine that. I'm just to keep the peace, keep things quiet. It can't be done. A white settler was murdered by Indians up on Willow creek two weeks ago. Some Indians jumped a white man's claim in Willupa valley the other day and there was almost a pitched battle.

"I was talking to Lou Endicott this morning. He says it's a mistake to wait a day longer. We ought to start rounding up the Indians tomorrow."

Bennett shrugged. What Lou Endicott or anyone else thought didn't make any difference. The General had had his orders.

"You like 'em, don't you?" said the General sharply. "You like the red devils."

"Some of them, yes," Bennett replied. "And some of them I dislike, just as I dislike some white men."

The General ran a hand over his bald head. He said, "All right, Captain Bennett. Suppose you take out a patrol, any size you want up to a hundred men. Settle the trouble in Willupa canyon and bring in the Indian who murdered the white man on Willow creek. If you think it can be done, try keeping things quiet until this Peace Commissioner gets here. Go ahead and try."

Bennett got to his feet. "Is that an order, General?"

"It's an order. Do you want me to change it?"

"No, sir."

"How many men do you want?"

"Six, General. I'll take six men with me."

"You're a damned fool, Captain. I wouldn't venture out after those Indians without six hundred."

Bennett shrugged.

"This will keep me on the move constantly," he said to the general. "It will be almost like being in detached service."

"Call it anything you like," answered General Merrill. "All I'm interested in is results. Sit on the lid until this Peace Commissioner gets here. He'll mess things up plenty and then I'll get my orders to move in. When will you leave?"

"Tonight. I'll send reports in by runner."

The General nodded. He frowned and, after a momentary hesitation, held out his hand. He said, "Good luck, Captain, and for God's sake, don't be too big a fool."

CAPTAIN Andrew Bennett accompanied by a detail of six men left Fort Stanley just after retreat. No ceremonies marked the departure but from the window of the headquarters building General Merrill watched the six men ride away and cursed himself for ever having let Bennett make his own decision. Then he wisely checked the written order to make sure that the determination of the size of the detail had been left to Captain Bennett.

The detail skirted Webber and angled north toward the mountains and Willupa canyon. Shortly after midnight they made camp. Bennett had chosen his six men quite carefully. Two were sergeants, four were privates. They were all older men, who had seen several years of service, men whose judgment had been tested under fire and whose patience had been tried in long campaigns.

They knew the score, all of these men. They knew that a man was coming out from the Indian Bureau to talk to Tuala Jack and that it was up to them to keep the peace in this area until he could get here and some decision could be reached. They knew there were Indians like Prince Henry who didn't want peace, and white men like Darby who could shoot an Indian at the first given chance. They knew that there would be no easy days ahead.

A guard was posted and the new camp grew quiet but Bennett was a long time in getting to sleep. This job he had undertaken he knew was one which he couldn't handle alone, or with six men or six hundred. He would need help from Tuala Jack and from the white men who wanted peace.

Just before he went to sleep he remembered the general's reference to Lou Endicott. Endicott, apparently, had wanted the Indians rounded up right away and started off to the reservation. Bennett wondered how the general had happened to consult Endicott. He could find no answer to this in his own mind.

THEY were on the march again before dawn and by noon had reached the diggings, high in Willupa canyon. Here in a wide creek bed close to a hundred men

were panning for gold. There was a small settlement in the canyon with a store and a saloon operated by a man named Al Condon. He was a short, scowling fellow with a heavy beard and dark, sharp eyes. He didn't own this place. He only worked here. The store and saloon were owned by Lou Endicott.

Bennett stopped to talk to him and to ask about the Indian trouble.

"Sure," Condon admitted. "We had a little trouble with some Injuns who tried to jump a claim but we kicked 'em out of here damned fast."

"We?" said Bennett. "Who is we?"

"A whole bunch of the fellows from the camp. No red devils are going to jump a white man's claim while I'm around here."

"Whose claim was it?" Bennett asked.

"Otis Singer's. You can find him on up north a ways."

"What became of the Indians?"

"They lit out of here mighty fast. I reckon they're still running."

Bennett nodded and left the store. He took Joe Fulton with him and hunted up Bill Jerome who quit work when they rode up, wiped off his hand and stuck it out, grinning.

"How's that family of mine?" Jerome demanded. "I'm pretty sure you've been there since I have."

"They looked fine to me," Bennett admitted. "I didn't like to leave."

"You after the Injuns they chased out of here?"

Bennett frowned. "I don't know, Bill. What happened?"

"You want it straight?"

"Of course."

Jerome pushed back his hat. He was a short, stocky man with a round, deeply tanned face. He had been a lawyer in the east and had planned on following the same profession here. Someday he would, but he had found little call for a lawyer's services around Webber and was filling in his days by panning for gold.

"There have always been a few Injuns working this stream," he said slowly. "They never worked it as thoroughly as we do but most of the time since I've been up here there have been a few around. We pretty well crowded 'em out, staked out our claims properly. They didn't understand claims or stakes but they kept away as we moved in, they gave us no trouble."

"Up north of here a fellow named Johnstone had a place he was working. He quit, gave up, left. Three Injuns appeared there one day and worked for a while. One of them found a nugget as big as your thumb and a few more almost as big. The next morning a man named Otis Singer showed up in camp and claimed to have bought Johnstone's claim. He said the Injuns had moved in on it and wouldn't get out and he asked for help in getting rid of them. He got it, all right. Plenty of help."

"Had he really bought the claim from Johnstone?"

"Probably not, but Johnstone was grubstaked by Lou Endicott and so is Otis Singer, and if necessary, Endicott could write the bill of sale. If you don't know it, Endicott has a grubstake interest in half of the claims here, already. And he's moving in on more of them. He's buying up land, too, around Coaga lake, one of the most fertile spots in the state."

"Was anyone hurt when the Injuns were driven out?"

"Not that I know of. There was some shooting. I heard that one of the Injuns was hit but I don't know it for certain."

"Were there other Indians around here?"

"Yes. They got out quick, and Endicott's grubstake men moved in on the places they had been working."

Bennett talked to Jerome for a while longer, then turned away and, with Sergeant Joe Fulton, headed back toward the store.

"This Indian trouble hasn't hurt Endicott a bit, has it?" Fulton mentioned.

"Not a bit," Bennett agreed.

"And if there's more trouble and the folks who have settled up around Coaga lake want to get out, he can buy up their places for a song."

Bennett nodded, but made no answer.

"That storekeeper's gone," Sergeant Haakon reported when he got back. "He talked to a fellow out here and sent him scurrying south while Condon went north."

They found Condon, Otis Singer and several others gathered at the place where Singer was working, and the story they got there was just what Bennett had expected.

Singer had bought this claim from Johnstone. He had asked the Indians who were working it to leave. They had refused. He had appealed to the camp and several men had shown up to help him take back what was rightfully his. The Indians hadn't put up much of a fight. They had fled north up the canyon.

"They had better not come back, either," Singer said bluntly. "What's mine, I keep."

"They went north, you say," Bennett repeated. "Up the canyon?"

Singer nodded. "Yeah, but I wouldn't follow 'em if I were you. Not with only six men. They were mean looking Injuns. Plenty mean."

Al Condon nodded. "He's right, Captain. If you ride up that canyon with only six men you'll never ride back. We had a crowd here in camp behind us but even at that we don't sleep very well, nights."

"Do you know the names of any of them?" Bennett asked.

"One of them," said Condon, "we called Scar-face. He had a scar across his left cheek from his eye to his jaw. He's a short fellow, ugly to look at."

"Wiluca," Bennett nodded.

"Huh?"

"That's his Indian name, or at least part of it. He's a nephew of Tuala Jack and not a bad fellow."

"You're crazy if you think so," Condon scowled. "You couldn't hire me to move a step up that canyon without an army at my back."

Bennett shrugged. He led his men away and started up the canyon. They camped that night half a dozen miles above the diggings and in the early, gray light of the morning, faced a sudden, withering attack.

THERE had been no warning of it at all. Shots streaked at them from either side of the narrowing canyon walls as they gathered around their breakfast fire. Sgt. Haakon, and Pvts. Rundstadt and Simmons went down at the first blast and Pvt. Trask dropped to the ground with a shot through the leg.

There was no chance to get away. Bennett dived for his gun and threw himself flat on the ground, rolling toward the scanty protection of a fallen log. He heard the crash of Fulton's gun and heard Fulton swearing as he reloaded and fired again. Pvt. Meyers was lying motionless on his face not far away. Bennett hadn't even seen him fall.

Fulton fired again and then reloaded and Bennett, aiming at a puff of smoke, squeezed the trigger. He saw a man's body rear up into the air and then drop and he reloaded his gun as quickly as he could.

"They're not Indians," Fulton called. "No Indian could ever shoot as straight as they're shooting. They're men from the diggings."

Bennett nodded.

A bullet tugged at the shoulder of Bennett's coat and he fired at another puff of smoke and reloaded his gun once more. Fulton was right, he knew. This was no Indian attack. The man he had hit hadn't been an Indian and there had been no war cries accompanying the attack, no shouting at all.

Shots were driving into the log behind which he had taken shelter and which was up-canyon from the attack. It gave him sufficient shelter, now, but wouldn't do for long, and he knew it. Men could circle behind him. He had maybe five minutes, maybe an hour. He had no longer than that.

Trask started crawling toward the log but a single shot stopped him and he lay still. Joe Fulton fired twice more, then came to his knees as the shock of a bullet reached him. He fell over sideways and didn't move again.

They were dead, all of them, all the six men he had brought along on this patrol. They were dead and his turn was next. Andy Bennett lay motionless behind the log, waiting. He knew a bitterness, then, which was like nothing he had ever felt before. He knew that this would be reported as an Indian massacre. He knew that it would serve as the instrument to send all the forces at Fort Stanley against the Indians in this region. And there was nothing he could do to prevent it. Nothing at all. This was what he had to die with, this knowledge of how his death would be used.

He gripped his gun tightly in both hands and waited, motionless, waited for some man to show himself, some man whom he could take along with him as he died.

He gritted his teeth at a sound.

CHAPTER TWO

The Ghost Patrol

WORD of the massacre in Willupa canyon was brought to Fort Stanley three days later when Lou Endicott rode out to the Fort with Otis Singer and Al Condon. The story, by that time, was already current in town and rumors of it had reached the Fort. This, however, was the first eyewitness report.

"Is it true?" the General asked as the three men came in.

Endicott nodded. "I'm afraid it is, General Merrill. The bodies, of course, were burned by the Indians after being stripped of everything of value. Positive identification is impossible but there can be no question as to what happened to Captain Bennett and the six men with him. Al Condon and Singer and a few other men were worried when they rode up the canyon alone after the Indians. They made up a party and followed but weren't in time to prevent the attack."

The General drew in a long, slow breath. "How many Indians were involved?"

"Twenty, maybe." Endicott guessed. "Thirty. It's hard to tell."

"Snake Indians?"

"Of course, and probably led by Tuala Jack. Who knows where they will strike next?"

The General got to his feet. "This does it," he said grimly. "To hell with that Peace Commissioner and his talk. We'll start after them tomorrow."

A brief, tight smile flickered on Endicott's face. It was gone quickly. "I'm sorry to see this," he said gravely. "Very sorry, but of course there is nothing else to do."

The General questioned Singer and Al Condon and got all the information necessary for a report, and then let them go. He thanked Endicott for bringing them and when the three men were gone he paced back and forth across the room, scowling. A campaign against the Indians was of course the only practical measure he could take but he didn't anticipate it with any relish. He knew too well the personal hardships of a campaign and he wasn't a young man any more.

An orderly came in with a paper in his hand. "A communication for you, General," he reported, saluting smartly.

"Lay it on the desk," the General growled.

The orderly laid the paper on the desk and left the room and the General continued pacing back and forth. After a time he stopped at the desk, picked up the paper, unfolded it and glanced at the message. His eyes widened as he read it and he dropped down in his chair and read it again. It was dated the day before. It read:

To Gen. In. Merrill, C.O. Ft. Stanley. From: Capt. Andrew Bennett, on detached service.

Subject: Indian Massacre

Sir;

I beg to report that there was no Indian massacre in Willupa canyon. The true facts of the incident there will be related to you upon my return. Your patrol is continuing upon its assignment.

General Merrill read this a third time, then searched in his desk for a specimen of Bennett's handwriting. He found another report of Bennett's and compared the two. There could be no question that the same person had written both.

"Simpson," he yelled. "Simpson!"

The orderly stuck his head in the door. He looked a little frightened.

"Who brought this communication?" the General demanded.

"An Indian, sir," replied the orderly.

"What Indian?"

"I don't know, sir. Just an Indian, sir."

"The next time an Indian brings a report or a letter or anything, hold him. Do you understand? Hold him."

"Yes sir."

"And send someone for Lou Endicott. Tell Endicott I'd like to see him here as soon as possible."

"Yes sir."

The General turned and stared out of the window. He mopped a hand over his face. He was perspiring.

JOE KERN got back to his house on the shore of Coaga lake quite late that afternoon and when he came in Helen laid her fingers on her lips and motioned him to be silent.

"How is he?" Kern whispered, looking toward the bedroom door.

"Asleep, I think," Helen replied. "But he hasn't slept much. He asked about the messages. I told him you had sent them."

"I did," Kern nodded. "Last night."

"And the bundle?"

"I brought it. It's in the barn."

"He has asked about it, too. What's in it, father?"

Joe Kern bit his lips. "Uniforms."

"Then what he told us was true."

"It must have been true. It's hard to believe, Helen, and I still didn't understand it, but it must be true."

"I understand it," said the girl. "Fred Abbott was here again today. He's coming back to see you tomorrow. He wants to buy our place."

"He might not be working for Endicott, Helen. He might want the place for himself."

"Not him. You only have to look at his hands. They're soft. He never did a day's work in his life. He's buying for someone else."

Joe Kern frowned. He was sometimes amazed at the quick perceptiveness of this daughter of his, but then she was a good deal like her mother had been.

He crossed to the stove to see what was on for supper. He was a tall, gaunt man, close to fifty, who had come out to this Oregon country only two years before and settled here on Coaga lake. He had never had trouble with the Indians and he anticipated no trouble now, so far as he was concerned. He would never consider selling this place.

A sound at the bedroom door caught his attention and he turned that way as it opened and frowned at the man who appeared there.

"You ought to get back to bed," he growled. "There's no call to get up yet."

Bennett shook his head. He had put on his trousers and tunic and had pulled on his boots. He moved, now, a little unsteadily, toward the table and sat there in a chair. A bandage covered most of his head and below it his face was pale, drawn and haggard. There was a three day growth of whiskers darkening his jaw and throat. His eyes were bloodshot.

"You sent the messages?" he demanded.

"One to Fort Stanley by an Indian and one to Tuala Jack," Joe Kern said quietly.

"The bundle?"

"It's in the barn."

Bennett put his elbows on the table and leaned his head against his hands. "I don't know why I'm living," he said. "They were all dead, all but me. I knew I couldn't get away. I lay without moving until they started closing in and I had a good chance at them. I got one man, a man with a red beard. I shot him through the head and that's all I remember until I woke up. It was dark by then, and I was still back of the log and the others were still where they fell."

"The killers probably thought you were dead, too," Joe Kern suggested. "That's a mighty nasty wound in your head. It was plenty bloody."

Bennett bit his lips, still talking in a monotone, as if to himself. "I made a funeral pyre for them," he said slowly. "I saved their uniforms."

Kern walked up and dropped his hand on Bennett's shoulder. He said, "Sure, Captain. That was just the thing to do but why talk about it?"

"I've got to talk about it," Bennett answered. "I've got to talk about it or I'll go crazy. Tell me this—do you believe me? Do you believe me when I say it was white men who attacked us and not Indians?"

"Sure I believe you."

"But would the General? Would the people in Webber? Of course they wouldn't. They'd say, *'Where is your proof?'* And I'd have no proof. I saw only two men clearly and one of them I killed. Who were the men who attacked us? Why did they attack us? Tell me the answers to that."

Joe Kern shook his head.

"They were Endicott's men," said Helen Kern. "They meant it to look like an Indian massacre. They did it to send the army out against the Snake Indians."

"But where is my proof?"

Ruth's hands were clenched tightly together. She was a short, sturdy girl, just past eighteen. She had dark hair and eyes and a thin, sensitive face. She had been frightened when Bennett stumbled in here the morning after the fight in Willupa canyon but she hadn't shown it. And she had cared for the wound in his head as

though work of such a nature was the usual thing for her.

"Someone's coming," Joe Kern said abruptly. "You'd better get back to the bedroom, Captain."

Andy Bennett nodded. He got to his feet and headed for the bedroom door. Helen moved to his side to assist him.

THE three Indians who rode into the yard slid down from their horses and one of them moved up to the door of the house where Joe Kern waited. He was short, stocky, and had broad, powerful shoulders. He wore an old coat and under it a leather jacket and a pair of dark, torn trousers. His feet were bare. His hair was dark and long over a square, thick-featured face, and his skin was a deep brown that set off piercing black eyes. He nodded to Joe Kern and said, "He is here?"

"Inside, Jack," Kern answered.

This was Tuala Jack, chief of the Cumbuthaw Snakes, at that time a man of forty-five and comparable in station to Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce tribe or Washakie of the Shoshones.

"He has been injured," Kern continued. "Perhaps he will tell you."

"I know of what happened," said Tuala Jack.

He turned and called one of the men who had come with him and the two silently followed Joe Kern inside.

Andy Bennett had heard their voices and, in spite of Helen Kern's protest, had returned to his seat at the table. He stood up and held out his hand to Tuala Jack and the Indian took it.

"You have not visited my country for a long time," said the Indian gravely. "You are welcome, Kamora."

Kamora was the name the Indians had given Bennett. What it meant, he didn't know. He had once asked Tuala Jack, but the Indian had only smiled and changed the subject.

"I have news for you, Jack," Bennett said slowly. "A man is being sent here from Washington to talk to you. He is called a Peace Commissioner. He is coming to talk to you about moving your people to the reservation."

The Indian frowned. "Why can we not stay here? This is our country."

"It might be possible," said Bennett, "that the mountains and hills above Coaga lake could be set aside as a reservation. You could ask for such a decision."

"That would be good. We would want no more."

Bennett sat down and indicated a chair across the table which Tuala Jack took. The others watched quietly from a spot back near the door.

"There is another matter which troubles me," Bennett said slowly. "The Peace Commissioner is not yet here and there are those among my people and among yours who would cause trouble. There are troops stationed at Fort Stanley. If there is too much trouble, these troops will march against you."

Tuala Jack scowled but made no answer.

"I have four things to ask of you, Jack," Bennett continued. "The first is this. Keep your people in the hills back of Coaga lake until the Peace Commissioner arrives and you can have your talks."

The Indian nodded. "We will stay in the hills."

"But some of your young men won't," Bennett said bluntly, "and this brings me to the second thing I would ask. By force, if necessary, keep your young men in the hills, those who would cause trouble, those who hate the white men."

The scowl came back to the Indian's face and he was silent for a long time. Bennett waited patiently.

"This will not be easy," said Tuala Jack. "It is never easy to confine a free people."

"It would be better than misunderstandings and war."

"But it will not be easy. My people will not understand."

"You must tell them."

"I will do what I can, Kamora."

"The third thing I would ask is this," Bennett continued. "Three days ago my patrol was attacked in Willupa canyon. I must know the names of the men who took part in that attack, where they were from and where they went when they left. I must have anything they dropped on the trail. I must be able to prove that those taking part in the attack were not Indians. One man, at least, I killed. His grave must be found and marked so that I can find it. You have young men who you trust

who could do this for me." Bennett's eyes shone.

"And one more thing, Tuala Jack. I would like to borrow six of your young men, six who can be trusted as you would trust your son and who will ride with me, do as I order them, and ask no questions. They will not engage in any fights. This I promise, but they must be seen with me. My patrol must still seem to exist."

"Will they wear the uniforms you took from those who were killed?" asked Tuala Jack.

Bennett frowned. "So you knew of that?"

Tuala Jack nodded.

"They will wear the uniforms, but only to be seen. Three must be short men, three must be tall. They must be here by tomorrow night. Will you do this for me, and for your own people, Jack?"

"I am putting a great trust in you, Kamora. It shall be done."

Bennett was feeling terribly tired. He had lost a great deal of blood and the rest he had had since reaching here hadn't been enough to build back his strength. He stood up and put out his hand and once more shook the hand of the Indian.

"We are putting a great deal of trust in each other, Tuala Jack," he said slowly, "but what we stand to gain is worth it."

IT WAS very quiet in the room after the Indians were gone. Helen set about getting the evening meal. Joe Kern stood at the window smoking his pipe. He turned around, finally, and looked at Bennett, scowling.

"So you're going to dress six Indians up in those uniforms," he said slowly. "And then ride with them. They'll name you a renegade if it's ever known."

Bennett shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe."

"And maybe you are, turning to the Indians for help."

"I turned to you, also, Kern. What I am doing is necessary. If it was known that my patrol had been wiped out the Indians would be blamed and the army would march against them. If I rode in and tried to tell the truth, I wouldn't be believed. There is only one course to follow and I am following it. My patrol was sent out to keep the peace and we shall do it."

"How, Bennett? Even Tuala Jack can't hold some of his men back, and if Endicott wants to stir up trouble, he has the men to start it."

"Then maybe we'll have to handle Endicott."

"How?"

Bennett had no answer for that. He stared bleakly across the room. Sooner or later he would have to come to grips with Lou Endicott.

CHAPTER THREE

Back Room Palaver

THE patrol climbed their horses through the hills and dropped down into the Willupa valley just after dusk. By ten o'clock in the evening when the moon was up, the patrol silently rode in to the settlement. They passed a dozen or more shack houses and there were six or eight men who heard them ride by and who saw them quite clearly in the moonlight.

Near the saloon the patrol reined up and Captain Andy Bennett dismounted. He gave the reins of his horse to one of the men who rode with him and moved ahead to the saloon door. When he opened the door and stepped inside his army Colt was in his hand.

There was quite a crowd in this small saloon and there was a good deal of noise, but as Bennett appeared the room grew still.

"Where is Condon?" Bennett asked bluntly. "Al Condon. I want him."

"He's not here," someone answered. "I reckon he's still in Webber."

Bennett's eyes raked from one side of the room to the other. He knew a few of the men here and knew that without any question, they recognized him.

"I wanted to ask Condon about the men who were murdered up in the canyon the other day," he said slowly. "I wanted to get the names of the murderers. If anyone here was involved they had better get out of the country fast."

There was a sharp, strained silence in the saloon, broken finally by a man at the bar who said, "We heard it was Injuns who killed those men, Captain. You sure it wasn't?"

"Positive," Bennett answered, "for I was there. One of the murderers was a

man with a red beard. Have you missed such a man from camp?"

"Mike Hanby had a red beard," said another man. "I haven't seen him around here for several days. Has anyone else seen him?"

A few of the men shook their heads but no one offered a direct answer.

Bennett holstered his Colt. He said, "Tell Al Condon I want to see him. Tell him I'll be back."

He turned, then, and stepped outside and as he mounted his horse several men stood in the door of the saloon and saw him lead his patrol on down the road.

The next afternoon the patrol was sighted crossing the Wrangel flats and that night it paid a brief visit to the settlement on Willow creek, where Bennett bought some supplies.

"I'm sure glad to see you, Captain," said the storekeeper at Willow Creek. "The story we had was that you an' your whole patrol had been massacred by the Injuns."

"Does it look that way?" Bennett asked.

The storekeeper grinned and shook his head. "Nope, but there are some folks in Webber who still insist that you're dead. I'm going in there tomorrow. Any messages?"

"One for Lou Endicott," Bennett said slowly. "Tell him that something happened to Fred Abbott and he'd better send out a man to replace him. And by the way, is anyone around here trying to buy up improved land?"

"A fellow named Sampson, but he's not had much luck so far."

"Where does he live?"

"He's staying with Emil Kraus, up north a ways."

Bennett nodded. He knew the place. "Tell Endicott to send out a man to replace Sampson, too," he suggested. "Sampson is about to retire."

The Willow creek storekeeper didn't quite understand what Bennett meant and even when he heard the next morning that the patrol had stopped at the Kraus home and arrested Sampson, he didn't understand. But he carried the message with him when he went to Webber.

LOU ENDICOTT paced back and forth across his office. There was an ugly scowl on his face and his temper had sharpened. He had always prided himself on his calmness and patience but his patience was wearing mighty thin.

There was a knock on the door and he jumped at the sound as if it had been a shot. He stared at the door and growled, "Come in." The door opened and Tom Hemmingway entered. Hemmingway was a man Endicott felt he could trust, for he knew things about Hemmingway which assured him of the man's loyalty. He was a tall man, broad shouldered and close to forty. There was a ruthless streak in his nature which didn't show in his grin or in his soft manner of speech.

"Well?" Endicott said sharply.

Hemmingway shrugged his shoulders. "I can't break him down, Lou. He still insists it was Bennett he talked to and he says he saw the others in the patrol."

"Then Al Condon lied to us."

"He must have lied, though I wouldn't have believed it. Lou, there is something strange about this, something I don't understand. A dozen men rode after that patrol with Al Condon. I've talked to most of them. They couldn't all be liars. I would be willing to swear that Bennett and his men had been killed, yet they seem to be alive. It's not only this storekeeper's story. Bennett and his patrol were back in Willupa canyon night before last, looking for Condon. Still they're dead."

"A ghost patrol," Endicott snorted. "Dead men in uniform."

"All right, you figure it out."

"They're not dead."

"Then whose bodies were burned up in the canyon?"

"I don't know and I don't care, but they're not dead."

"And when they get Condon—"

"See that they don't, Tom."

Tom Hemmingway shrugged. He said, "What do we do about Sampson and Abbott?"

"We send out two more men."

"They'll not get far. They'll not buy up much land unless there's trouble with the Indians and people get frightened and want to get out."

"There will be plenty of trouble with the Indians."

"Maybe not, with Bennett's patrol riding. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes, but I still see trouble."

Lou Endicott twisted his hands together, cracking his knuckles. He said, "Tom, find Prince Henry. Get him in here to see me. Prince Henry has no love for any white man or even for Tuala Jack. Drop everything else and find him."

Hemmingway shrugged. He headed for the door and as he reached it he looked back. "While I'm doing that," he suggested, "you might keep an eye open for Andy Bennett. He told that storekeeper he meant to drop around and collect a drink. Maybe ghosts get thirsty. I wouldn't know."

THEY had two prisoners in their camp in the hills near Coaga lake, two men who had been sent out by Endicott to spread rumors of Indian troubles among the settlers and to buy up any improved land which was for sale. Both men readily admitted they had been trying to buy up land and that Endicott had supplied them with money. They insisted that in talking of trouble with the Indians they were only repeating rumors which everyone had heard.

To this camp about ten days after the fight in Willupa canyon, three Indians brought another prisoner. He was a bearded white man who was close to fifty and who had been fearful, since his capture, that each breath he drew would be his last.

"He is one of them," a tall, young, sun-bronzed Indian said to Bennett. "He was with the men who attacked you in the canyon. He can name the others."

Andy Bennett faced the man and at the sight of him the man gave a strange cry and covered his face. "You're dead," he said thickly. "Dead. I saw you lying there covered with blood. I—" His voice choked up. He couldn't go on.

"Who were the others?" Bennett asked bluntly.

The man shook his head. Perspiration covered his face. He wiped his hands over his eyes.

"Who were they?" Bennett insisted. "Name them if you want to live. Name them."

The man bit his lips. He looked at Bennett and then looked at these Indians who surrounded him. He started talking.

Bennett wrote down what the man said and that afternoon rode down to the lake and brought Joe Kern back with him. He had the man read and then sign the statement and had Kern sign it as a witness. He gave Kern the paper to keep for him.

"What now?" Kern asked him. "You know who the men were."

"Now," said Andy Bennett, "I go after Endicott."

"He's a clever man," Joe Kern said slowly. "He's a man who looks ahead. He's making money in his saloon and store and in his grubstake mining deals, but the real wealth of Oregon lies in its land and Endicott sees it. He could afford to toss over everything else if he could buy up enough property around Coaga lake and along the Willow."

Bennett nodded his head. "And he could buy up a lot of it cheap if there was trouble."

"How will you reach him?"

"I don't know, Kern."

Bennett was frowning. He looked much better, now, than he had that day when he had talked to Tuala Jack at Joe Kern's home on Coaga lake. He wasn't so haggard and his eyes were clear again. His shoulders were square and he had more self assurance.

"Webber's his town, Bennett," Joe Kern warned. "He's got the same kind of men there he sent up the canyon after you."

"I want them, too," Bennett said flatly. "But Endicott first. If he planned that massacre in the canyon he could plan something else, equally as bad. I can't wait any longer."

"When are you going after him?"

"I start tonight. Tomorrow night I'll be in Webber."

Joe Kern nodded and soon afterwards he started back home. He didn't say anything about it to Bennett but he privately planned to be in Webber the next evening, himself.

ANDY BENNETT rode south that night. He spent the next day in a lonesome camp in the hills west of Webber.

He rode on just at dusk and within two hours pulled up at the town. It was cold and was raining again and there weren't many people on the streets. Bennett pulled in at the tie-rail in front of the bank.

A man coming down the street with his head lowered against the rain took a sideward glance at him and called out a vague

greeting. Bennett lifted his hand in answer. It was too dark to see a man's face, and this, at least, was in his favor.

The street was a sea of mud. Bennett sloshed across it toward the High Tower saloon. He turned off between two buildings near the saloon. He knew about Endicott's back office and he thought he might find the man there. He would have no chance at all if he tried to buck the crowd in the saloon.

There was a light in the saloon's back room but the window was curtained and Bennett couldn't see inside. He moved on to the door and listened and through it could hear the faint murmur of voices. Very slowly and carefully he tried the knob, but the door was locked. After a moment's hesitation, he drew his Army Colt and, holding it under the protection of his coat, knocked on the door.

Footsteps approached the door and Bennett heard the click as it was unlocked. the door was opened a scant inch.

"Who is it?" demanded a voice. "What do you want?"

Bennett gave his answer in the Indian dialect, mentioning Endicott's name. He knew that Endicott had dealings with some of the Indians and thought that this back door approach might not be unnatural. Apparently, it wasn't.

"It's some Injun," said the man at the door. "I think he wants to see Lou Endicott."

"Let him in," said another voice.

The door opened wider and Bennett stepped forward, now, thrusting his Colt out in front of him. The man at the door jerked back, raising his hands shoulder high, a startled gasp tearing from his throat. The two other men in the room came to their feet as Bennett appeared. One of them, Al Condon, started to reach for his gun, but quickly changed his mind and raised his hands. Hemmingway stood rigid, his hands half lifted, his eyes sharp, watchful.

Bennett closed the door and leaned against it. He was soaked through by the rain. Water dripped from the brim of his hat and from the corners of his coat. His boots were caked with mud. There was a tight, harsh look on his face.

"Where's Endicott?" he asked sharply.

Hemmingway moistened his lips. "Out someplace. I don't know just where."

Bennett scowled. He knew Hemmingway and Condon. Who the third man was he didn't know and just then he didn't much care.

"Sit down at the table, all of you," he ordered. "And keep your hands on it. Keep them in sight. We're going to have a little talk."

IT WAS warm in the room. Bennett noticed the heat the minute he entered. A stove against the side wall glowed red and he moved now so that it was behind him. He stood there, soaking up the heat and watching the three men at the table. A lamp hung from the rafter above them. To Bennett's left was the door to the saloon. It was closed, but through it he could hear sounds from the front room. Any minute that door might open and someone might come back here.

He considered this possibility and decided not to worry about it until it happened. "Where did Endicott go?" he asked quietly.

Hemmingway blinked and shook his head. "He didn't say, Bennett. I didn't ask him."

"When will he be back?"

"I don't know."

Bennett glanced at Al Condon. The canyon saloonkeeper was staring at him wide-eyed. He was pale, and perspiration showed on his forehead. The other man looked just as startled. He was a heavy, broad shouldered fellow with thick, puffy lips and pale blue eyes.

"What's your name?" Bennett demanded.

The man gulped. He said, "Ath—Atherton. I—"

"Fred Atherton," Bennett nodded. "You were one of them, weren't you. Which man did you kill, Atherton? Are you the one who shot Emil Trask when he was crawling for shelter?"

Atherton shook his head. "I wasn't there," he said hoarsely. "I wasn't there. I don't know anything about it."

"But you were there," Bennett corrected. "That's right, isn't it, Condon? He's one of your crowd of murderers."

Al Condon swallowed. He made no answer. His breath was coming faster and he was leaning forward a little. He had pulled

one of his hands to the edge of the table.

"I don't know about you, Hemmingway," Bennett said slowly. "You weren't named, but I have at least two of the murderers here. They tried to kill me once. Maybe they'd like to try again."

Atherton shook his head almost violently but Condon seemed fascinated. His body was tense. His hand, near the edge of the table was rigid.

Condon jerked suddenly to his feet, catching the edge of the table as he arose and thrusting it upward and toward Bennett. He clawed for the gun he was wearing and a high, shrill scream of profanity broke from his lips. Atherton was twisting back, reaching for a gun. Hemmingway was backing to the wall. The Army Colt jolted against Bennett's hand as he fired it, stepping away from the table which crashed against the stove.

Al Condon screamed again, this time in anguish. He dropped his gun and clutched at his stomach, swaying from side to side. Bennett thumbed back the hammer of the Colt, turned it on Atherton and fired again just as Atherton's gun came up. He turned then toward Hemmingway but the man's hands were lifted shoulder high and he was shaking his head.

Atherton was on the floor and Condon's knees were now sagging and would no longer hold him up. He fell heavily, half across the body of Atherton. One of his legs started jerking convulsively. There were no sounds from the saloon now, and it was terribly still in this room. Bennett's throat felt dry and his lips were parched. He stared at Hemmingway, wondering why he had decided to stay out of this. Then he moved over toward the back door, still covering Hemmingway with the Colt. There were men on the other side of the door to the saloon but they were prudently waiting there until they knew what had happened.

"It's too bad Endicott wasn't here," Bennett said flatly. "I reckon I'll have to come back."

Hemmingway made no answer. There was a blank, stony expression on his face. Bennett reached back for the door knob. He turned it, pulled the door open and stepped outside and didn't bother to close it. As he moved out of Hemmingway's sight a shot blasted through the door and then through the wall of the saloon in the direction he had taken and he heard Hemmingway's voice shouting to the men in the saloon.

He started running, then, knowing full well that the men Hemmingway controled would be after him and that some lying story would be told to the men in the saloon to justify shooting him down. It was still raining, still pitch dark, and there was no moon or stars. Bennett turned back to the main street. He crossed it and angled toward the Jerome home. It was risky to go there, he knew, but this was a risk he had to take. He had missed Endicott and now might not be able to corner him. To stop him from what he might do he had to have help here in town.

CHAPTER FOUR

Coaga Death

LAMP light showed around the curtained windows of the small log-slat house at the edge of town. Bennett circled to the back door and knocked. The door opened immediately and Bill Jerome reached out and pulled him in.

"It's you, Andy! It's really you," Jerome was saying.

Myra came back from the parlor, running. She pushed past her father into Bennett's arms. He forgot, for a moment, how wet and muddy he was.

"They said you were dead," Myra whispered. "Even after your report to the General and after you were seen, they said you were dead."

"And maybe I am," Bennett said frowning.

Myra shook her head and held him tighter.

With an arm around Myra, Bennett followed Jerome to the front room. Mrs. Jerome welcomed him and there were tears in her eyes, too. She stood on tip-toe and kissed his cheek and said, "We've missed you, Andy. Missed you terribly."

The stove was warm and Bennett moved up close to it and held his hands out to its heat. Myra, standing near him, was looking into his face and a worried frown was furrowing her forehead. Bennett looked at her and smiled and then he turned to face Jerome.

"I shouldn't have come here," he said slowly. "I can't stay. Get a paper and pencil, Jerome. I want you to write down some names."

Bill Jerome looked puzzled. "What names?"

"I'll tell you. Get a paper and pencil."

Jerome got a pencil and paper and sat down at the table. He looked up at Bennett.

"Al Condon," Bennett started. "George Hall, Fred Atherton, Ed Price, Nels Johanson. . . ."

He named eleven men before he was through and when he had finished he said, "You can draw a line through the names of Al Condon, George Hall and Fred Atherton. Hall is a prisoner back in the hills and only a few minutes ago Condon and Atherton were shot. The rest, so far as I know, are still free and still around here or in Willupa canyon."

"Who are they, Bennett?" Jerome asked, still puzzled.

"They are murderers. They surrounded our camp in Willupa canyon and shot down six of my men with no warning at all. We didn't have a chance."

Bill Jerome mopped a hand over his face. "But your patrol—I don't understand, Bennett. Dead men can't ride."

A brief smile showed momentarily on Bennett's face. "Mine did," he answered. "And they may ride again if necessary. Bill, I want those men I listed rounded up. I want you to get in touch with Joe Kern. He has the statement Hall made. The statement lists two more names, names of men who were killed in the fight. It tells where they are buried."

Jerome mopped a hand over his face. He stared at the list of names.

"Kern knows the whole story," Bennett continued. "He will back up everything I said."

"What about Endicott?"

"Round him up with the others, if you can. One of them may talk. Bill, you've got to do this. Find men here in town who will help you, men who don't want to see a war. There are plenty of them. Tuala Jack is doing his part. We've got to do ours. I can't do it. The Army can't do it. This is a matter for civilian discipline."

Jerome nodded his head. "There are plenty of men I can get," he said slowly, "and Joe Kern is in town. I saw him early this evening. We will start tonight, Andy. I'll see Kern right away. It's going to take a lot of talking to convince some men that your patrol isn't on the job. That's something I still can't understand."

"A good soldier never dies, Bill. They were good soldiers. Their job isn't finished."

"Where are you going?"

"Where is Endicott?"

"I saw him late this afternoon talking to an Indian in front of his saloon."

"What Indian? A short, heavy set fellow, ugly, scowling?"

"The one they call Prince Henry."

Andy Bennett sucked in a long, slow breath. He had the sudden, sharp fear that he might already be too late in closing in on Lou Endicott. It would be easy to inflame a man like Prince Henry and send him out on a bloody trail.

"Where did they go?" Bennett asked. "Where are they now?"

Bill Jerome shook his head. "I've no idea."

"Find out," Bennett said harshly. "Get them. Get them if it is at all possible."

Myra was at his side as he reached the door and he paused for a moment and looked down at her. "One more patrol," he told her. "Perhaps the most important I've ever made. I've got to leave, Myra. I'm already late."

The girl nodded. She bit her lips. "Make it—fast as you can," she whispered. "Don't leave me alone too long."

IT WAS still raining and dark outside, and for a moment Bennett stood close to the house, his eyes probing the shadows. This, he knew, would be the most likely place for Endicott's crowd to look for him. His close friendship with the Jeromes was well known and it would be easy to guess that he might stop here.

This side street seemed deserted. He could see no one moving anywhere. He took a step forward, then came to an abrupt stop. A shadowy figure had moved around the corner of the house. Bennett reached for his gun.

"Kamora," said a low voice. "Kamora."

"San-no," Bennett answered. And then, "What are you doing here?"

He moved over to join the Indian, a scowl darkening his face. San-no was one of the young men Tuala Jack had loaned him, one of the ghost patrol, though he wasn't wearing his uniform tonight.

"You were to wait in our camp," Bennett said gruffly.

The Indian shook his head. "Tuala Jack said we were to stay with you."

"Where are the others?"

"They wait across the river."

"The uniforms?"

"We have them, Kamora. We thought they might be needed. We thought we might be riding to the Ten Smoke mountains."

"And why would we be riding there?"

"It is where Prince Henry has gone, and the man you call Endicott."

Bennett sucked in a long, deep breath. He didn't know how San-no had learned this but he didn't for a moment question it.

"Only those two?" he asked.

"In the Ten Smoke mountains are the *puska* Indians," San-no answered.

There was a note of contempt in his voice just as there had been when he had mentioned Prince Henry's name. *Puska* was the term the Indians used to designate those who did not abide by the councils of the tribe. They were the rebellious, bitter, irresponsible crowd which had gathered around Prince Henry. They had once tried to challenge the leadership of Tuala Jack but had failed to overrule him.

"We can't ride to the Ten Smoke mountains," Bennett said slowly. "I gave my pledge to Tuala Jack that you men would do no fighting. There would be trouble if we rode to the Ten Smokes."

"There will be trouble if we do not, Kamora. We do not have long to talk."

Bennett bit his lips. This was the feeling that he had. "Can we get word to Tuala Jack?" he asked abruptly.

"A message has already been sent to him."

Bennett nodded. "I will get my horse. I will join you."

"We wear the uniforms?"

"Yes, you wear the uniforms," Bennett answered slowly. "But you do no fighting in them."

The Indian laughed soundlessly. "They can come off quickly, Kamora, if it makes so much difference what a man wears when he fights. I have moved your horse. Come this way."

THAT night, a group of carefully selected men gathered at the home of Bill Jerome. They listened thoughtfully to what Jerome had to say, and to Joe Kern, and then they set out. Within an hour five arrests had been made and five men were held in custody in the warehouse back of Longacre's store. They were sullen and defiant at first and they wouldn't talk, except to boast that it wouldn't be long until they were free. By morning they were getting a little worried.

That night, an Indian rode swiftly toward Tuala Jack's village in the hills back of Coaga lake. He reached there by early morning and made his report and Tuala Jack's face hardened as he listened. A brief council was held and soon after the sun was up a war party left the hills and struck straight across the flats toward the Ten Smoke mountains.

That night, in Prince Henry's camp, there was war talk and plenty of white man's liquor to feed the fires of bitterness and to inflame the *puska* against the settlers. Lou Endicott, the good friend of

Prince Henry and therefore the good friend of all other *puska* Indians, was there. He had brought them new guns. He understood them and agreed that all this country should be theirs. He was ready to help them take it back.

And that night the ghost patrol rode again, six uniformed men led by a seventh. They headed straight for the settlement on Willow creek and were seen in the early light of the dawn as they skirted the village and continued on toward the Cordovan mountains which the Indians called the Ten Smokes.

They stopped for a time in one of the narrow valleys and San-no made a map in the sand of a stream, indicating where they were and where the *puska* Indians had their camp. It was not far ahead.

"How many are there?" Bennett asked.

"Six times as man as we," San-no answered. "And perhaps even more."

You think that Endicott is with them?"

"He rode that way with Prince Henry."

Bennett studied the map until he knew it and was sure he could find the camp. He could enter it, he knew, for there was as yet no open warfare and because of the uniform he wore the men with Prince Henry would want to hear what he had to say. Leaving the camp was another matter, and certainly would not be easy if Endicott was there.

"You and the others will take off your uniforms," he said slowly. "You will bury them. We will not need them again."

The Indian nodded.

"You will then join Tuala Jack," Bennett continued. "You will tell him that my people will place in jail those who would cause trouble with his people. You will tell him that he must act as sternly with the *puska*. The Peace Commissioner will soon be here but there will be no peace if the *puska* make war."

Again, San-no nodded. He turned and spoke to the others and made a ceremony of accepting the uniforms they had worn. Then he buried them. The ghost patrol had made its last ride.

LOU ENDICOTT had not wanted to come here to the *puska* camp. He had not come willingly, even though the night before in the council Prince Henry had called, he had done everything that he could to seem friendly. The afternoon before he had ridden out of town with Prince Henry to see two other Indians Prince Henry had insisted that he talk to and after the talk Prince Henry had bluntly ordered him to come along with them.

"You have made us great promises," Prince Henry declared, "but many white men have made us promises. We want to be sure you will keep them."

Endicott was nervous this afternoon, nervous and irritable and close to being desperate. He had to get away, soon after the attack on the Willow settlement, at least. And he wouldn't have to worry, then, about the promises he had made. When the attack was known the soldiers would march against the Indians and wouldn't stop until they were rounded up. That meant not only these but the Indians who followed Tuala Jack as well. The soldiers wouldn't distinguish between the *puska* Indians and the others. The soldiers probably didn't even know the word, *puska*.

He told himself, over and over, that there really wasn't anything to worry about but he couldn't smother his uneasiness. He wished that Prince Henry would get his men started. He would have to ride with them, he knew, but the attack was to be made at dusk and in the confusion of the attack he could make his escape. There was no other sure plan that he could follow.

A sudden activity in the camp made him feel that Prince Henry was about to call his men together and get started and he arose from where he was sitting and headed for the smouldering council fire. He had taken only a couple of steps when he stopped, every muscle in his body rigid. A man in uniform had come into the camp. Andy Bennett!

Endicott brushed his hand across his eyes and looked again. He could hardly believe what he saw. Bennett had apparently walked in here of his own choice. There were no Indians holding him. He stood stiff as a ramrod as he spoke to Prince Henry. Endicott's hand dropped down to his gun and he half drew it. Then he shook his head and his hand fell away. This wasn't something to be handled with a gun. There was a far better way. He moved ahead to join the group around Andy Bennett.

It had been easy to walk into this camp. Bennett had left his horse a mile back. The Indians had posted no guards and he had reached the edge of the camp, undetected, then had moved directly toward the dying fire as casually as he might have walked into Tuala Jack's village. He had been surrounded almost at once and by the sullen expressions on the faces of most of the Indians he knew that he wasn't welcome. He knew, too, that at any moment one of the Indians might strike him down from behind but he tried not to show any anxiety. "I want to see Prince Henry," he said to the first Indians to reach him. "I have a message.." And having said that, he waited.

Prince Henry pushed through the crowd circling him and stared at him defiantly, almost arrogantly, his hand on his knife. "What is the message?" he demanded.

Over the heads of those at the side of him Bennett saw Lou Endicott moving forward but he didn't look at him directly. "I wanted first to tell you this," he said slowly. "You have been listening to the council of a man who lies. He has said he would help you but he cannot help you. He wants you to attack the white settlers so the army can be sent against you. He wants you to kill the white settlers so that he can take and sell their land. He is no friend to any Indian, Prince Henry. He is an outcast even from his own people. Why do you listen to his lies."

"All white men lie," said Prince Henry bluntly. "If he has lied, he shall die like the others."

"He will not die," Bennett answered. "You will die, Prince Henry. You and your people."

There was an angry mutter from the crowd surrounding him. Prince Henry drew his knife. There was a dark, crooked scowl on the Indian's face.

"Give your knife to the white man who calls himself your friend," Bennett suggested. "Place him before me. I will prove to you that he has lied. I will make him tell you of the trap that awaits you if you do as he suggests."

PRINCE HENRY'S eyes narrowed and, watching the man, Bennett could almost read his thoughts. Prince Henry, he knew, trusted no white man and this mention of a trap had him worried. The Indian suddenly turned and called Endicott who was standing on the fringe of the crowd and Endicott moved forward, scowling. He didn't understand the Snake dialect. He didn't know what the talk had covered.

"He says you lied," Prince Henry told Endicott in a guttural English. "Take this."

The Indian thrust his knife into Endicott's hand and stepped back. His meaning was unmistakably clear. Endicott stared at the knife and then looked around at Prince Henry and from the expression of the Indian's face he knew that talk would not save him from facing Andy Bennett. In some queer way Bennett had worked things so that this test between them could not be avoided.

There was a faintly mocking smile on Bennett's face. He had drawn his own knife and stood there, staring at Endicott. The crowd around them drew back a little, a sharp interest showing in the attitudes of most of the men. A fight such as this might be was something they could relish, something which struck an instant response in their nature. The issue was of little importance.

"This is the finish of all your fine dreams, Endicott," Bennett said under his breath. "Are you ready?"

The nervous tension Endicott had felt was suddenly gone. Here, in front of him, was the man who had wrecked all his plans, who had come back from the grave to stand in his way. His hand closed tightly around the knife Prince Henry had given him and he sucked in a quick, sharp breath, his muscles growing tense. He was no stranger to the use of a knife. This was something he understood.

"Ready," Bennett said again.

Suddenly, and with no warning at all, Endicott lunged at him, slashing upwards with his knife. Bennett jumped back. He laughed and shook his head and said, "Not that way, Endicott." He moved forward, jumped back again as Endicott stabbed at him and then suddenly closed with the man, dropping his knife and catching Endicott's knife wrist with both hands and twisting it sharply. He swung his body against Endicott and tilted the man off balance and fell across him as Endicott hit the ground.

He was still holding Endicott's knife

wrist and he jerked it now between them so that the blade was pointed toward Endicott's chest. Endicott was breathing heavily. Perspiration stood out on his forehead and his eyes had a wild, desperate look. He jerked his body from side to side trying to throw Bennett off and he brought his other arm up to support the one holding the knife.

Bennett's arms and the weight of his body were forcing the knife slowly downwards. The point of it was at Endicott's shirt. Bennett rocked forward a little and the point of the knife reached lower.

"Tell them you lied, Endicott," Bennett said hoarsely. "Tell them of the trap."

He was speaking in the Indian dialect, speaking to the Indians who were now pressing closely around them, rather than to Endicott.

"Tell them you lied," he said again. "Tell them you lied," he said again. "Tell them you lied."

Bennett rocked forward again and a spot of red showed suddenly on Endicott's shirt. A high, shrill scream broke from the man's throat. His body twisted convulsively. And suddenly an Indian's hands grasped Bennett by the shoulders and jerked him away, breaking his grip on Endicott's wrist and Prince Henry stepped between him and Endicott.

Endicott scrambled to his feet, his face ashen, his breath still coming in labored gasps. Prince Henry reached forward and took the knife from him and Endicott made no objection. He wiped a hand over his face.

"Speak," said Prince Henry grimly. "What is the truth?"

"I—told you the truth," Endicott replied. "It is Bennett who lied. Bennett who—" Endicott's face was ghost white.

Prince Henry slashed out with his knife, ripping it into Endicott's stomach and again Endicott screamed. The Indian stepped in closer to him and raked the point of the blade across Endicott's face and then buried it again in the man's stomach. Endicott staggered backwards, his hands clasped over his stomach, blood oozing through his fingers. His knees gave way and he fell to the ground. Horrible half screams were coming from his throat. Prince Henry moved forward and stooped over him and used the knife once more. There was no screaming after that.

The Indian wiped the blade of the knife on the dirty trousers he was wearing and turned back to face Bennett. There was a wild, excited look in the man's eyes as though this taste of violence was not enough and Bennett knew it was his turn, now. He looked on the ground for the knife he had dropped but didn't see it. Some Indian had probably picked it up.

"Death to all white men!" Prince Henry screamed. "Death—"

He broke off what he was saying, his body growing suddenly rigid as from the forest all about there were high, shrill cries. Those who had been crowding around Bennett turned to look toward the edges of the clearing and Bennett looked, too. Armed Indians had surrounded the *puska* settlement and now moving toward them was Tuala Jack and a dozen of his men. Tuala Jack's face was dark with anger.

The *puska* Indians drew back until Prince Henry was left to face Tuala Jack and though some of them seemed cowed, Prince Henry had lost none of his arrogant defiance.

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"What does the leader of the old women want of Prince Henry?" he demanded. "Why have you come here?"

"You are still a little boy with a big voice," Tuala Jack answered, "but too many have listened to you. We have come to see that you cause our people no trouble. To be sure of it we will take you and these others back to our land."

"You will take me nowhere," Prince Henry shouted.

He drew back the arm holding the knife he had used on Endicott but before he could throw it Tuala Jack lifted the rifle he was holding and pressed the trigger. The bullet caught Prince Henry squarely in the chest. The knife dropped from his hands. He took a step forward, turned half around then then fell to the ground.

There was a sudden, sharp flurry of battle as some of Prince Henry's followers fought back and others sought to escape, but the fighting was over quickly. The *puska* Indians were greatly outnumbered. They didn't have a chance.

JOHN REYNOLDS, the Peace Commissioner sent out by the Indian Bureau had his formal conference with General Merrill.

"So you're going to give them a reservation in the hills back of Coaga lake," the General growled. "Well, they'll never stay there."

"But they may," Reynolds replied.

"We ought to move 'em all out of the country," declared the General.

"Why?" asked Reynolds. "As I understand it they've caused no trouble recently."

"Give them half a chance and they will."

Reynolds shrugged his shoulders as though he knew there was no point in arguing this with the General. "Who is this Captain Bennett who you have named to head the detail which will accompany me when I ride to Coaga lake to see Tuala Jack?" he asked.

"He's my senior officer. He got married yesterday to a girl in Webber."

"Does he know anything about Indians?"

"He knows one when he sees one, I suppose."

Reynolds frowned. "What's this ghost patrol I heard rumors of when I was in Webber?"

"It's just a story," said General Merrill. "I sent Captain Bennett and six men out on a patrol about a month ago. Some outlaws from a mining camp in Willupa canyon had a run-in with them and wiped out the patrol. Bennett escaped and spent a couple weeks recovering from wounds at a settler's place on Coaga lake. It was at first thought that Indians had wiped out the patrol but some of the local citizens got the true story and held a private hanging party for the guilty men."

"But this patrol business?"

"Oh, that. Well, for a while after the patrol was wiped out there were rumors that it had been seen here or there. You know how stories such as that are built up. Why I even got a report some crank wrote and sent in, presumably from Bennett who was too near death at the time to know who he was."

An orderly came in and said that Captain Bennett was waiting to meet Mr. Reynolds. The General asked the orderly to send him in. Andy Bennett entered the room. He saluted, then stepped forward and shook hands with Reynolds.

"I've just been telling Reynolds this story about the ghost patrol," said General Merrill. "He heard of it in Webber."

"It's an interesting story," said Reynolds slowly. "And strangely enough, as I understand it, there had been trouble between the settlers and some of the Indians before this—er—ghost patrol started its riding."

"But most settlers," said Andy Bennett, "and most Indians didn't want trouble. I suppose this story of the ghost patrol was just invented to explain why the trouble stopped."

"You know Tuala Jack?" Reynolds asked.

"I've met him."

"Will he agree to a reservation in those hills back of Coaga lake?"

"I think he will."

"Can he keep his people there?"

"I believe so."

"Let's leave tomorrow," Reynolds suggested. "I'd like to get this finished.

Andy Bennett nodded.

He saluted the General, shook hands with Reynolds and nodded. "Tomorrow morning," he agreed. "Early."

THE END

Lord of Horn and Hoof

By HAROLD F. CRUICKSHANK

For an hour the bulls grunted and bawled, whirled and struck.

Bleeding and battered, Moosewa rushed the wolf-dog and his mate, his deadly antlers poised and canted for the kill. Then it was fang against pronghorn, with death to the loser!

THE YOUNG homesteader, Bill Dean, pulled up sharp in his tracks. His heart began to do nip-ups as he listened to the threshing sounds made by some creature at the site at which he had had made his panther trap set.

"Got him at last!" Bill said sharply. "Reckon from now on we can raise hogs in peace." Bill was thinking of the big catamount which, a few evenings ago, had raided the Dean hogpen and killed almost a full litter of pigs. Bill's father had promised Bill a bonus of ten dollars if he could trap the marauding panther; that could buy a lot.

Here it was! Bill levered a cartridge into the chamber of his Winchester and slid through the brush, only to stop short again when, through a break in the willows, he glimpsed a gangling bull moose calf caught by a hind foot in the trap.

Bill recovered from his shock and now began to talk softly as he advanced on the frenzied, gangling youngster. He stopped, to throw his rifle to his shoulder, but he didn't press the trigger for he suddenly found himself looking directly into the large,

soft eyes of the trapped youngling—eyes that seemed to send out an expression of appeal. Bill swallowed in sharp gulps, but pulled himself together. Here was good tender meat for the Dean's table—meat that would be welcomed by the homesteader family. Bill had often killed young wild stock when absolutely necesary for food and on such occasions he had felt no sentimental qualms. Yet he held his fire now.

"Mebbe if I can get you free," he said, "you'll grow to the ring-snortin'est bull in the whole of the Athabasca country. You—"

Bill broke off. It had just occurred to him that the calf's nigh hind foot must be smashed to a pulp. Perhaps he would have to kill after all, to put the youngling out of his misery. But to the youth's astonishment as he surveyed the trap's heavy jaws, he saw in them with the moose hoof a doubled willow. He whistled sharply.

"The wild gods were sure enough watchin' over you, pardner," he said. "Now hang an' rattle. I'll get a pole an' lever you out."

Bill figured that the prying out process, with lever and fulcrum would not be too difficult because of the twisted willow which had the steel jaws partly open. The calf, in crashing through the willow brake must have drawn down the willow in the cleft of its trapped hind foot.

But when Bill moved in closer, the calf whirled and butted. Only in the nick of time did Bill spring back to avoid that hammering, hooking head stroke which could easily have broken a rib or two.

Bill came in again, but worked his pole lever at longer range. Still the vigorous, fear-crazed youngling gave him no chance.

"Don't seem any use, feller," Bill said, blowing hard from his exertion. "I reckon there's on'y one way out and that's—" He was reaching for his rifle again when suddenly an idea snapped.

Bill took his pole lever and broke an end of it off between two tree boles. Now armed with a stout club, he came in. With both hands, he struck, a terrific blow behind the calf's ear. Blatting, the young bull buckled at the forelegs, but he recovered, shaking his head. Again Bill lunged and at his second blow the calf sprawled in a heap on the ground.

He was breathing heavily as Bill examined him. Swiftly the youth went to work and in a moment the trap jaws gave. The bull was free.

Bill backed to a tree bole, just for safety, as he watched the young one recover slowly. Not for a long time did the calf realize his freedom. But finally he staggered to his hoofs, hung a moment reeling as if he would drop again. His out-of-proportion head sagged to one side and his tongue lolled.

"I hated to do that to you, Moosewa," Bill said. "Mebbe you'll never right recover from those blows, but it was the on'y way I could free your laig. Now—shoo! Scram! Beat it!"

Bill waved his club and yelled again and slowly the calf seemed to recover and understand. He raised his lolling head slightly, blew hard through his flaring red nostrils, then, with a low, piteous blat, he stumbled on into the cover of the nearby woods.

BILL DEAN wiped the sweat from his forehead and mumbled something under his breath. He was wondering just why the mother of the calf hadn't responded to the young one's cries—those frantic blats and grunts of terror.

Two days later Bill solved this when he came across the mangled carcass of the cow moose and her other young calf.

"Wolves!" Bill gasped. "Reckon my little lop-head friend won't stan' much chance now—all alone. It might've been better if I'd kilt him there at the trap."

The youth strode back to the homestead yard across the creek. He had been disturbed by the wolf sign, and before he reached home he turned to glance about him, shuddering. For all his fondness for this wild hinterland and its creatures, he seemed to feel its isolation today—its very grim wildness more than ever before.

There was work to be done, a lot of work ahead, hard, tough work; clearing, stumping, haying, fencing, logging and Bill was sharply reminded of all this as he grimaced. with the smart of an open callous in the palm of his right hand.

But Bill worried about the little bull moose.

"For his age, he sure is husky," he thought. Recently he had come across the calf's tracks: there was no mistaking them

for the left rear hoof still dragged. But now and then Bill had been pleased to observe the full imprint of that injured hoof, which proved to him that young Moosewa was recovering.

* * *

Young Moosewa, the calf, bedded down frequently. Whenever he roamed, he did so timorously, blatting every now and then as if he still called in vain for his mother. It was fortunate for him that the local wolf pair had been well gorged on their kill of the cow and her calf. For the time being, at least, Moosewa need have no fear of them.

He browsed on tender willow tips and on grass. More than once, though, as his foot healed, he broke for the habitat of the man creatures when his keen sense of smell warned him of the nearness of some predator. Once, he came face to face with a huge black bear and froze with fear as his great eyes sought hers for sign of belligerence. But the old she bear merely grunted and lurched away, calling to her twin cubs.

Flies bothered Moosewa, especially the pestiferous sandflies which swarmed to harass his ears. They bothered him the more when in order to get rid of them he had to shake his head—a head which still retained a dull ache.

But the fly problem was partly solved when Moosewa learned to glide through the brush, scraping them clear, or when he ventured to a small slough lake. It was while at the lake sedges that he discovered the first creature of his kind he had seen since the loss of his mother. A gigantic bull stood withers deep in the lake.

Moosewa saw only the rump and the high shoulders of the big bull, whose head was down in the water. But suddenly Moosewa started as that great, antlered head emerged, and the big bull blew and snorted. He carried a long shoot of lily root in his mouth.

The little bull waded forward as far as he dared and then, when the big fellow snorted—a warning that he had come far enough—Moosewa dipped his own head below, almost drowning himself in the act, but in time he learnt to bite a quick hold on a stem of vegetation with his flexible upper lip and to snatch his head sharply back.

He blew, as his great sire had blown to clear his nose of muck and water and his blowing brought the head of the oldster about.

His newly developing antlers burning, throbbing, still in their tender velvet stage, the big bull was in surly mood. As well, the worble grubs were torturing him under the skin of his back.

He snorted again and tossed his massive head as a further caution to Moosewa that he would brook no further advances, but he made no other gesture of belligerence. The young bull backed off and returned to the willow browse, but instinctively he felt a sense of security on his range now. From that day on, before he bedded down, he circled his bedground, testing wind—making sure he had the tang of the big bull's scent strong in his nostrils.

For a time he trailed the great one daily, but seemed instinctively to realize as the autumn waned that the big bull had reached a period when it was dangerous to be near him.

But when that season was past, again Mosewa was able to trail and to draw up much closer to his huge sire than ever before.

Moosewa grew rapidly and could now

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stand, walk and trot firmly on all four hoofs. He felt the urge to travel, to establish a range of his own. And for some time he lost the trail and scent of the big one.

IT WAS when the heavy snows came that Moosewa saw the manifestation of the big bull's sagacity and great fighting power. Moosewa heard a sharp, high-pitched wolf cry which startled him, causing a fear sweat to lather his body. He started bounding off in all directions, scarcely knowing what action to take until suddenly, out of a belt of spruce timber trotted the magnificent oldster bull, head high, his wide antlers carried proudly like pygmy oaks.

Moosewa trembled as the big one came to a sharp halt, wheeling, snorting, not many feet away. The snow at this point was not very deep. There was good footing here, but the big bull at once began to stomp it, pack it to firmer footing.

A wolf cut from the edge of a willow brake.

The adult bull reared, blowing sharply. Like lightning, he whipped about and chopped down between the wolf and the calf. Moosewa quivered. His first impulse was to break and run, but it seemed as if the big bull anticipated any such desire. He held Moosewa close to him at the packed-snow area.

Another wolf leaped from the breaks, but the big bull struck sharply, accurately with his terrible forehoofs. There was a soggy impact of those hoofs striking the gray marauder. The wolf crawled back to the willows, there to die.

But there were more wolves and for a time Moosewa, too, was forced into battle. He reared and chopped, spinning instinctively when his hamstrings were threatened. Again the big bull made a kill, catching a big dog wolf on one of his antler tines. He grunted as he tossed his huge head back, to hurl the gray creature smashing into the willows.

Shortly, the fight was done and, save for some superficial fang wounds which dripped blood, the oldster bull was not hurt. Moosewa was unscathed. In grandiose majesty the great antlered one tossed his massive head high and blew vigorously. He now turned to Moosewa and grunted. He permitted the frightened youngster to approach him, to touch his muzzle. Again grunting, he now turned and led Moosewa on to the nearest big tamarac and willow swamp where the moose yard was established.

It was here at the yard that Moosewa came in contact with young bulls of his own age. Here, the old bulls would shed their antlers. They would feed along regularly packed routes amongst the willows. Here they would unite in their defense against marauders.

Moosewa blew his challenges to the other youngsters on whom he tested the power of his butting head. His exercise and the good browse brought rapid development to his swiftly growing body. There was no young moose in the yard with such length of limb, nor height and span of shoulders.

In his second year, Moosewa established his range close to the creek zone where, more than once he was watched by the man creatures. He was readily recognized by Bill Dean because, if by no other identifying feature, of the cant to his head.

This morning as he proudly displayed his new spikes, the men saw him.

"That's him, dad!" Bill Dean exclaimed, pointing. "Lookit the spikes he's grown. Lookit his height. Did y'ever see such a size for his age?"

"Unh . . ." Sam Dean grunted. "He's got too many good steaks an' roasts under that hide to last, Bill. Sure as shootin' one of the loggers from the woods camp will pick him off, an' another thing: if'n our Hereford bull ever catches him on the creek meadow pasture, he'll become hamburger."

"Yeah—but, dad, I think after what he come through he deserves a chance to live, huh?"

"Okay. Okay, son. I ain't said I'd kill him. There was a twinkle in Sam Dean's eyes. He was glad young Bill had no inclination to kill every wild creature he saw. It did a young fellow no harm to learn to respect Nature's wild creatures save when, of course, it was necessary to kill for food.

They turned to their work in the meadow and from time tc time Mosewa raised and turned his slanted head to watch them, seeming to realize that they would not harm him. At last he turned and moved on to the lake where grandiosely he blew and snorted as if to impress a sleek young cow feeding in the sedges, but she paid no attention to

him, nor his velvet-covered spikes which he tossed ludicrously on his strangely lopsided head.

That winter young Moosewa had his developed power tested at the moose yard. The Oldster bull was absent. When the timber wolf attack came, it seemed that for a time Moosewa was alone. But he reared into battle and struck with terrific suddenness and accuracy. Through he missed his first thrust, he made up for this a few moments later by rushing and mashing against the boles of a birch clump a young dog wolf which came slinking in to decoy him.

Moosewa grunted and blatted. He reared, and whirled and chopped and though most of his action was wasted on the speedily shifting marauders he at least saved his own hamstrings and his life.

He came out of the battle action bleeding, but gloriously victorious. It mattered not to him that while he defended his own hamstrings, two young cows and a yearling bull had been killed. Nor was he concerned, later, as he listened to the slosh of fangs, wolf fangs in the flesh of his kindred.

* * *

It was in his fifth year that Moosewa received his first big test of battle action power. As the rutting season approached, he proudly scraped the last of the dry skin from his antlers on tamarac boles—antlers of tremendous size and wonderful symmetry. In all the hinterland there was no grander set of antlers.

This evening as he came up along the creek meadow Moosewa paused and tossed his head at the call of a domestic cow creature. Then suddenly he whirled at a high-pitched bugling cry of a domestic bull. At first Moosewa thought he was hearing the close in call of Manya, the king bull elk. Curious, he minced forward toward the willow fringe, but shortly halted as, emerging from the breaks, came a huge, squat creature, with two strong spiked horns.

All at once, that strange one rushed and Moosewa was forced to rear and wheel clear. He grunted throatily as a sharp horn grazed his flank. But Moosewa's blood flowed with the strong mad fighting passion ot the season. Here was a creature challenging his power, his right to the range. He swung and rushed, head down, but the other creature, despite his seeming awkwardness met him and hooked fiercely. Moosewa almost toppled. One of those spiked horns had hooked him up high inside a foreleg, and although the wound was not serious it registered the power of the white faced one.

For an hour the bulls grunted and bawled, whirled and struck, until at last Moosewa decided this antagonist was far too solid, too heavy to master. Now as the domestic bull rushed. Moosewa canted his already canted head and rushed to meet him. The white face rocked back on his haunches, bawling throatily, but both decided they had reached a state of stalemate. Neither seemed anxious for further combat.

"Mo-o-o-o-o—yaw-w-w-w—Wo-o—"

Moosewa spun, grunting thickly. That call—that plaintive cow moose call, stirred his blood and every nerve fibre. He reared and whirled and went crashing on toward the north, smashing brush in his path, blatting his short throaty calls as he hurricaned to the tryst.

As if he had forgotten any previous experience, Moosewa quickly learned that the road to the tryst is not strewn with soft lichens and violets. He came to a skidding halt, faced by a bull—an oldster whose palmated antlers were well spiked, whose head was down belligerently as the moon reflected his shadow in Gargantuan proportions.

But Moosewa was big, young; he had courage and a terrific fighting urge.

As he recovered he bellowed counter-challenges and rushed. Their antlers crashed together like the smacking of dry tamarac moles in a hurricane. Moosewa was hurled back on his haunches.

Not for upwards of an hour could he penetrate the strong defensive parries and thrusts of the old bull. But it was Moosewa's habitually canted head which at last aided him.

He no longer attempted head-on thrusts, nor did he now attempt to straighten his cant-head when charging. Instead, he allowed his head to slope normally and charged in this strange, sidewise fashion, completely throwing the big oldster off in his timing.

When the big bull attempted to counter, by swinging, Moosewa was in position to follow sharply this shift. The younger bull at last thrust with all his power and his

antlers smashed the other and gripped. For a long moment they stood swaying thus. Though their antlers were not locked, Moosewa had a grip with his tines against the other's antlers. Then suddenly, grunting savagely, he put all his neck strength, backed by the power of his prodigious size, into a terrific twist of the neck.

He leaped back as the oldster toppled to lie groaning—groaning as death stole in to claim him. His neck was broken and now Moosewa whirled to smash at a willow clump as if to proclaim his majesty to the world. But shortly he grunted and leaped the willow scrub as a sleek form glided past his line of vision.

ALMOST A month later, young Bill Dean glimpsed Moosewa. The young homesteader brought his duck boat around an island of tules at the lake, to glimpse the big one standing over his knees in water.

Bill's heart picked up its beat, for he had never seen a creature more magnificent. Not even the cant of Moosewa's head in any way robbed him of his magnificence.

"King of the woods for sure," Bill said softly. "But, you still got that slant head to remind you you were once a dang fool ca'f that got in a bear trap." The boy chuckled softly, but suddenly he started at the ripping blast of a rifle shot. He saw Moosewa's back sag. A second shot sounded and Bill could almost see an upper tine shot from the great palm of Moosewa's antlers.

Moosewa was hit, but all at once he whirled and, despite the handicap of bad footing in the sedges, he speedily struck shore. Before the hunter could sight him he had bounded to the cover of the willow brush.

Bill Dean paddled sharply to shore and was climbing out of his boat when a hunter floundered up.

"You see that big bull, kid?" the man asked sharply. He was a stranger to Bill, whose eyes narrowed as he conned the man's build and clothing.

"You're a logger aren't you, mister?" he asked.

"Yeah. I'm woods foreman up at Northern's camp One. Why? Ain't it legal to hunt hereabouts?"

"Legal enough, mister, but I been savin' that big bull. I rescued him from a bear trap when he was a ca'f, and—you happen to be huntin' on our land, without permission."

"Well, now, ain't that just too sen'imental!" the big woods boss growled back. "I hit that bull, I know, an' I aim to track him down. Ain't never lost a critter I've hit. I—I want that head, boy an' I'm goin' to get it!"

The man humped up his packsack and moved off to search for Moosewa's trail. Bill scowled as he watched the big logger pick up the trail beyond the willows. Suddenly Bill galvanized to action. A sharp thought struck him. No one could sift faster through the brush country than he. He was determined to save Moosewa if at all possible.

Hiding his ducks in the fork of a poplar tree, he picked up his old ten gauge shotgun and struck out toward the north.

* * *

Moosewa trotted tirelessly on for some distance before he at last felt his strength waning. He had not been seriously wounded, but he had lost blood. The bullet had cut through the muscle of his shoulder hump and the wound bled steadily. Now and then he swung back in short circles, to pick up the trailing man's scent and it caused the fear sweat to exude from Moosewa's hoof glands.

Instinctively he struck off toward the northwest, seeking out the chains of swamps where there was plenty of cover in the willow fringes which skirted the muskegs. When at last he reached the big dry tamarac swamp which covered a wide area, he plunged into the maze of twisted windfalls without hesitation, threading his way through the labyrinth with an expertness and speed no man creature could match. It was a deathly place where a single misstep could have meant a broken limb, but Moosewa reached the other end of the swamp without mishap.

He chose a spot where the willows reached down to the swamp edge. He bunched his powerful body, then leaped high, to clear completely the first willow clump, leaving no trail at all. Now he turned sharply to westward. He must reach the river. He wanted deep water not only as a means of escape but as first aid for his wound. Not yet was the Athabasca completely frozen over.

DUSK WOULD shortly sift down to gray the orange-purple of sunset's aftermath. Young Bill Dean saw by the formation of Moosewa's tracks that the big bull was tiring.

Moosewa's handsome head seemed to sag into a more acute cant as he trotted on. Every time he circled to try wind, he quivered as he caught stronger and stronger man scent.

Bill Dean came across sign where the bull had stood and tested wind. Bill remembered the boast of the logger boss that he had never failed to get a wounded creature and it seemed the man had made no idle boast, for he was now well up with Moosewa.

All at once Bill was conscious of the fact that Moosewa had steadily veered toward the river. This gave the youth a sudden sharp idea. Though tired himself and having sustained a sharp crack on one kneecap at the big windfall swamp, he tightened up his nerve fibres and now cut sharply to left. He had a plan in mind in his last desperate effort to save Moosewa.

Within a hundred rods of the river, Bill glimpsed the woods boss. He also caught a glimpse of Moosewa.

"Mebbe I'm crazy to get between a hunter an' a wounded critter," Bill told himself, "but I just got to he'p out ol' slant head."

He struck sharply for a hogback ridge. The bull would have to cross this ridge in order to reach the river bank whose slope to the water was not too precipitous for safety. Bill made for a higher knoll beyond the ridge and had barely reached it when, from his coverage of a wild rose bush clump, he saw the logger. The man seemed to anticipate the bull's next move. He knew that Moosewa would be forced to climb the ridge, or else face the possibility of a sheer cliff drop of a hundred feet or more.

Haltingly, nervously, the big bull came into view. Bill Dean's heart skipped a beat as he turned to watch the man. The logger was raising his Winchester, taking aim when suddenly, Bill flung up his old ten gauge and pulled. The explosion thundered along the river valley like the blast of detonated stumping powder.

Moosewa reared and whirled to cover. Now, in utter desperation he found a reserve of strength and speed. He struck into his strange, awkward lope, which carried him completely from view in a straight southerly direction, and—for the time being—to safety.

Not until Moosewa struck the deeps of a stygian belt of spruce timber did he halt.

He grunted as he flopped to his bed ground, his nose turned into the wind. Slowly, his great head sagged to rest. Now and then his sharp sense of hearing brought him man sounds, voice sounds, but his keen nose told him he was safe.

The man voice sounds persisted for some time as the woods boss berated young Dean.

"I've a mind to whup the daylight out of you," he thundered as he strode up toward Bill. "That bull was my moose an' you knowed it, yet you come huntin' him with a shotgun."

"I wasn't huntin' him, mister," Bill rejoined softly. "I was warnin' him. I—"

"Why, you durned wet-behind-the-ears young sod-buster, you. I'll—"

He lunged forward, but he stopped as he heard the click of the hammer on Bill's old ten gauge.

"Stan' your hand, logger," the youth called out. "There's another home-filled ca'tridge in ol' Bessie says you ain't goin' to whup me or anybody. Next time, you pick up your moose trails on somebody else's land. While the big slant-head bull's usin' our place for a range, I'm watchin' out for him, savvy?"

The big man fumed. He glared at Bill whose thumb was still on the heavy hammer of the old ten gauge.

He turned and moved off into the deepening dusk, swearing, muttering as he went.

Young Bill Dean got to his feet, chuckling softly. He broke his gun and pointed the single barrel up at the sky, squinting through it. He'd fired his last cartridge warning Moosewa.

Now Bill charted a course for home, but at a point where he glimpsed broken willows, indicating that Moosewa had swung toward the deep wood, the youth halted and grinned.

"Luck to you, ol'—slant-head," he said. "Come on down to the meadow an' see us ag'in. We'll be lookin' for you."

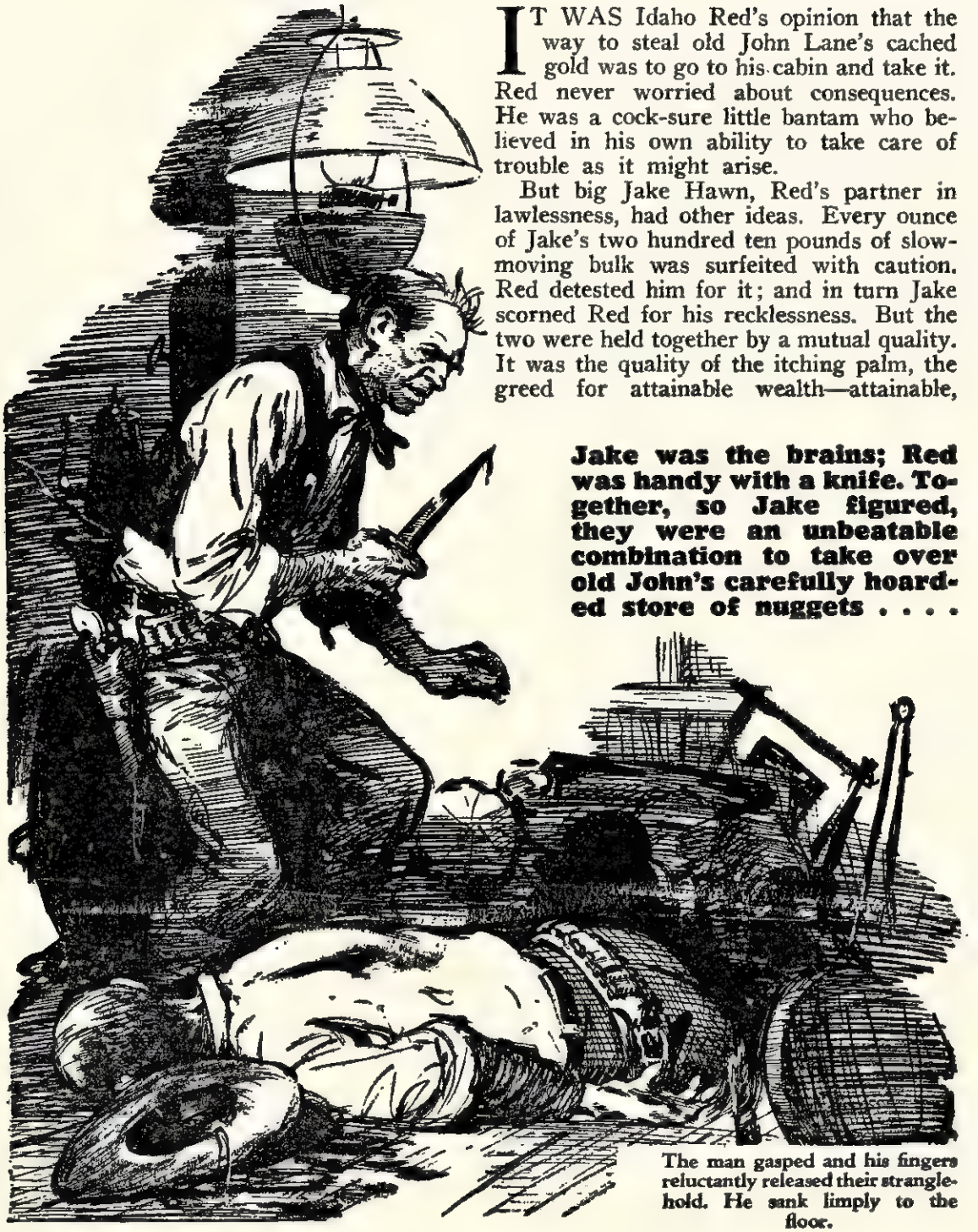
A Killin' Makes 'Em Mad!

By SPENCER FROST

IT WAS Idaho Red's opinion that the way to steal old John Lane's cached gold was to go to his cabin and take it. Red never worried about consequences. He was a cock-sure little bantam who believed in his own ability to take care of trouble as it might arise.

But big Jake Hawn, Red's partner in lawlessness, had other ideas. Every ounce of Jake's two hundred ten pounds of slow-moving bulk was surfeited with caution. Red detested him for it; and in turn Jake scorned Red for his recklessness. But the two were held together by a mutual quality. It was the quality of the itching palm, the greed for attainable wealth—attainable,

Jake was the brains; Red was handy with a knife. Together, so Jake figured, they were an unbeatable combination to take over old John's carefully hoarded store of nuggets . . . .



The man gasped and his fingers reluctantly released their stranglehold. He sank limply to the floor.

that is, for the taking. And in the pursuit of their disreputable profession they had found cooperation profitable.

Robbing the unsuspecting old John Lane seemed like taking candy from a baby, which fact in no way hurt Red's conscience. But big Jake, with his usual meticulous attention to disagreeable details, pointed out that the marshal of Potter's Gulch had an apt and suspicious eye for gents who labored not, and that already he had questioned both Red and himself about their business in the camp. Should old John's gold disappear, that officer's suspicion would immediately point at them. They must, Jake declared, use precautionary measures.

Red scoffed. The job looked too easy to require preparation. They had learned beyond reasonable doubt that old John who worked a mine a few hundred yards from his cabin, had several month's take of gold hidden some place, and after careful study of the set-up, Jake announced that the cabin was the logical hiding place. It nestled against the side of a bluff near, though obscured from, a neighboring cabin which housed a miner, two women, and a flock of children. Jake called attention to the fact that any disturbance in the cabin would attract the attention of these neighbors. Also, that at frequent intervals throughout the working day, John Lane sent old Trotter, his big yellow mongrel, from the mine to the cabin on an inspection trip. This precaution seemed to confirm the conclusion that the gold was in the cabin, but it also presented the risk of being sniffed out by the big, well-trained dog should they attempt to raid the cabin during the day.

Red was afraid of dogs. He acknowledged it. But he still thought he could outsmart one. He favored raiding the cabin, grabbing the gold, and then shaking the brick-colored dust of Potter's Gulch from their feet.

But Jake vetoed that idea. They would steal the gold, all right. But they would do it in such way that the marshal of Potter's Gulch could not suspect them. He had a scheme.

Jake always had a scheme. He was big and slow and ponderous. His shrewd little black eyes were set deep in a bulldog face behind which lurked a sagacious mind in which no good thought ever found its way. His enormous head seemed to rest directly upon his thick, hunched shoulders, and when he walked his big arms swung in a sort of semicircle before him. Even Idaho Red, who swung a skillful and deadly knife when the going got tough, loathed the big, scheming hulk who owed no debt to conscience, felt no pity, and loved only big Jake Hawn. And Red feared him. He told himself that it is good sense to fear a treacherous man; and Jake was treacherous. And with such fear in mind, Red took courage in the six-inch blade of his spring-opening, bone-handled knife. Red was an expert at using a knife.

Jake won the argument. He usually did. The raid on old John's cache would be carried out along the cautious lines which Jake had devised.

THEY LEFT Potter's Gulch by stage to Blue Mesa. There they bought and outfitted two good saddle horses. Then they rode in a half circle around the Gulch and approached it from the north side. The last two days of that ride took them through desert and barren ranges, and no man set eyes upon them. Jake gloated in self-satisfaction at his shrewdness. But Red stretched his saddle-cramped legs in their camp near the edge of the gulch, and pointed down at the roof of old John's cabin.

"Look at it," he snarled at Jake. "Squatted down there in the bushes just like it was when we left it. We've rode a million miles through the sand and cactus, I've got scratches from my shins to my chin and saddle callouses on the seat of my pants that'll go with me to the grave. And where have we come to? To the other side of the cabin! And the job still to do. Caution! Phooey! If we'd done my way we'd now be passin' old John's nuggets over the shiniest bar in Frisco."

"If we'd done your way, my impulsive friend," the unperturbed Jake replied, "we would now be feeding buzzards from the end of a rope a short ways up the gulch."

"You make me tired," Red declared. "Always lookin' for danger ahead."

"Danger ahead, behind, and at hand is one of the unfortunate features of this business," said Jake. "And because of that fact there is still work to do. Old John has a dog."

"Yeah. Mean-tempered brute. I'm afraid of dogs," said Red.

"If he should come up while we're in the cabin, he'd sniff us out like a hound treeing a rabbit. One howl and here would come old John."

"You musta been thinkin' while we rode."

"We've got to get rid of that dog."

"Nix. No shootin'. That cabin just around the butte's full of women and kids."

"There are other ways besides a gun. The dog has made a path between the mine and the cabin, and a short distance below the cabin a granite shelf overhangs the path. I'll wait on that shelf. I'll have a club and slug the dog on the head as he passes. Simple."

"Yeah? A lot more unnecessary trouble. But go ahead and roost on the rock with a club in your hand. Not me. I just don't like dogs."

"Of course," Jake continued smoothly, "there is old John to consider. When the dog fails to return to the mine, old John will come looking for him."

"It's up to us to grab the stuff and clear out before that happens."

"Impractical. We won't find the stuff done up in neat packages and waiting for us on the cabin table. We'll need time. While I take care of the dog, you go to the mine and take care of old John."

"Me? You're crazy! This job don't call for killin'. That always arouses the Vigilantes."

"It's a simple matter. Old John knows you. He won't be suspicious. And when he isn't looking you can use your knife. You're handy with a knife."

"Sure I'm handy with a knife. But not handy enough to fight a sheriff's posse. A killin' makes 'em mad. But stealin'— that's old John's hard luck. No killin'. Not me."

"Very well. I'll handle old John myself. You take care of the dog."

"I told you I'm afraid of dogs."

"Not *dead* dogs. Old Trotter won't be dangerous when he's dead."

"Sure, *when* he's dead. But anybody with the gumption of a toad would know that he'll be packin' his nose along with him when he trots up from the mine, and he'll get my scent up there on the rock just as well as he would in the cabin. Club him over the head? Not me!"

"Of course the dog would scent us in the cabin," Jake agreed. "He'd pick up our trail at the door. But out there on the ledge he won't cross your trail because you'll come down from up the bluff. You'll be entirely above him, and the prevailing wind blows up the canyon, which is away from the dog. Besides that, everything is bone dry. Scent don't carry when it's dry like this."

"Me, I'm not mixin' with no dog," said Red.

Jake whirled fiercely upon him. "Take your choice, the man or the dog," he snarled.

All trace of suavity had vanished from Jake. His eyes now glittered with the murderous glare of the killer. Red had seen it before. It always gave him the urge to reach for his knife. But not now. There was much at stake. After a moment Red spoke deliberately.

"The man who kills old John is layin' up trouble for himself. I don't aim to do it. I'll take the dog."

IDAHO RED lay sprawled face downward on the granite shelf which overhung old Trotter's path between the cabin and the mine. In Red's hand was a four-foot club and in his heart heavy misgivings. Red was afraid of dogs. He tried to quiet his injured feelings with the assurance that after all he was only pitting his skill and intelligence against a dog. As old Trotter passed under him, he'd slug him on the head with the club. No struggle. No fuss. Like poling a beef. Red had done that with a light sledge hammer.

A tawny-colored bit of movement caught his eye through the brush ten yards away. Red poised the club and lay tight to the shelf. He made a test-swing at the pathway below. His position required a left-handed swing and it seemed awkward. Red was not good at a left-handed swing.

He glance back. The dog was trotting closer, muzzle low. He looked as big as a lion. Red never had realized how big that dog was. His hands gripped the club savagely. He must make the first blow good. Everything depended upon it.

But the position seemed awkward. He could not risk a left-handed blow. He'd let the dog go through to the cabin and catch him on the way back. From the other

end of the shelf it would be a right-handed swing. Sweat was pouring from his face as old Trotter, blissfully unaware of danger, trotted on to the cabin.

Red laid down the club and mopped his face with a hand that bore the deep imprint of the club. A flash of movement down the gulch caught his eye. It was Jake, running around the base of the hill to keep out of sight of the women and children in the neighboring cabin as he left old John's mine. That meant that Jake had finished with John. He had made a quick job of it. A wave of contempt swept over Red. It was an easy matter to walk up to an unsuspecting old man and when he wasn't looking, slug him. But with a big, vicious dog like Trotter it was different. Red's gaze was belligerent as he watched Jake disappear around an out-jutting point of the bluff.

He turned to watch the path while a growing sense of dissatisfaction seized him. After a moment the dog's big yellowish frame emerged from a clump of bushes that fringed the path near the cabin. Trotter was on his way back to the mine.

Red's tongue nervously licked his lips. Again his hands gripped the club until the knuckles stood out white and sharp. He caught broken glimpses of the dog through the brush. For some strange reason he looked even bigger coming down the hill than he had looked going up. A chill of apprehension seized Red. What if he should miss that first blow? What if, in spite of the wind, the dog should catch his scent? Shuddering at the thought of a fight with the dog, he shrank back from the edge of the shelf. The thought was drumming through his mind that a club was a poor weapon to use on a dog that big. Confound Jake! He was always planning something. Causing trouble to avoid trouble. Too cautious.

Suddenly the lines of anxiety in Red's face disappeared with a little spasm of quick jerks. His eyes narrowed. With only an instant of hesitation, he began squirming backward on the rock shelf—back from the path and the possible scent-range of the approaching dog. And Trotter continued his unmolested way to the mine of his master.

Jake was already in the cabin when Red got there. He was studying the little room with the prying eye of a detective looking for a clue. Red gave the place a cursory glance. Except for being neat and clean it was much like any miner's cabin. There were a heavy board table, a home-made stool, a wall cupboard neatly stacked with a handful of dishes and utensils, and a big home-made stove from which the pipe ran straight up through the roof. Stoves were scarce in Potter's Gulch since they had to be freighted in. Apparently old John had ingeniously met the situation by making himself one out of a small steel oil drum into which he had cut the necessary openings for door and pipe and which he had set on legs made of short pieces of three-inch gas pipe. All of which indicated to Red that old John Lane was something of a mechanical genius, but nothing more. He turned sharply to Jake.

"Well, what're we here for? Come on, let's start turnin' this joint inside out."

Jake raised a restraining hand.

"Not so fast, blunderer. Any fool could tear the place to pieces. What I want is the gold."

"And you expect to find it by standin' there like a wart on an old maid's nose?"

"I notice," said Jake," that old John

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WILDROOT CREAM-OIL HAIR TONIC

was an orderly and intelligent man. Therefore he would deviate from the usual method of storing his stuff beneath a loose board in the floor. In fact he selected an unusual hiding place. But he left a sign."

"What d'ye mean he left a sign?"

"The stove, you will observe, is set in the middle of the room. The stock of foodstuff is stored on the left so that his business about the stove would be on that side. And sure enough the floor there is scuffed up with the marks of shoe nails. But on the other side of the stove what do you see?"

"I see a rough pine board floor and that's what you see. Cut out this horse-play and let's take a look around."

Jake stooped down and pointed to some discolorations on the floor.

"Shreds. From a green-colored mackinaw," he remarked as he plucked some threads from a floor splinter. "And muck from the mine such as a man carries on his clothes. That means that old John laid down on the floor, not once but often when he came in with his work clothes on. His shoulder probably rubbed the floor here, twenty inches from the stove. Why? The answer is obvious. He was putting his stuff some place under that stove."

"Yeah?" Red sneered. "That thread on the floor don't read like no blue-print with scale and footnotes to me."

* * *

Jake dropped on his belly and ran an exploring hand under the stove. Red watched him for thirty seconds, then he impatiently jerked loose the pipe and left it swinging crazily from the roof while he seized the stove, tipped it over, and laid it side downward on the floor. Jake crawled over for a closer examination.

The stove bottom was smooth. It contained no evidence of a hidden panel or trap or any such thing. The gas-pipe legs, capped at the lower end, were held in place by a pounded-out flange slipped under some steel lugs which old John had soldered on the bottom. Jake laid hold on one of the legs and pulled it loose. It swung heavily in his hand. Turning the leg upsidedown Jake pounded it on the floor. Out came a double handful of nuggets that rolled crazily on the floor like marbles spilled from a boy's pocket.

Jake dropped the leg and his big hands greedily scooped the little pebbles into a mound. Red, on his knees, snatched up a nugget and examined it with lustful eyes.

"We've got it!" Red gasped.

Jake scooped up the pile in the cup of his big hands. Red jerked from his pocket a big soiled kerchief and spread it on the table. With loving reluctance Jake allowed the nuggets to trickle from his hands into a little pile upon the kerchief.

For a moment both men stood with eyes glued to the sight. Then Red whirled and eagerly began prying another leg loose from the stove. Jake quickly followed his example. They were not disappointed. The contents of those two legs added greatly to the size of the mound. Red, by a split second, beat Jake to the fourth leg, and with a sharply-drawn breath of triumph poured the contents upon the pile which now overflowed the kerchief. Red's eyes were wild with the glorious sight of it.

"Mebbe's there's more some place," he gasped.

"There is no more," Jake declared. "That first leg wasn't full, which shows he was still using it."

"Then we'll divide now," Red declared.

Jake nodded. With his two big hands he leveled out the pile, then measuring carefully with out-spread hands, he drew a thick finger through the pile dividing it into halves.

Jake produced a leather pouch from a trousers pocket and into it he meticulously scooped one half of the loot. Red lifted the remaining portion in the kerchief. The weight threatened to burst it. He snatched one of old John's shirts from a peg behind the bunk, wrapped it compactly around the loot, and tied it securely with the two sleeves. Jake watched, the sneer on his thick lips proclaiming his contempt for the man who was not prepared to handle the loot he had come to steal.

WITH his parcel of wealth under his arm, Red turned to the door, but he jerked up sharply with a startled oath. Old Trotter stood there, his enormous forepaws on the threshold, his hackles erect, his upper lip drawn back from glistening fangs, while a low, threatening growl rumbled up from him.

With the suddenness of a man who was mortally afraid of dogs, Red jumped aside

and kicked the door shut so violently that the dog was knocked back from the doorway. The next instant Jake's big hand laid hold of Red's collar, jerked him around and held him a fast prisoner.

"Why didn't you kill that dog?"

The glare of murder shot from Jake's little black eyes. Red dropped his shirt-bound bundle, his hand flashed in movement, and with a deep-throated growl Jake hurled him backward barely in time to escape a swing of the knife. An enraged roar burst from Jake.

"Draw that knife on me, will you? You welched on the job, you little cuss. Now we're treed here. Why didn't you kill that dog?"

Red crouched, knife poised, his eyes shooting fire.

"Naw you don't Jake. You don't call my hand. I didn't kill the dog because I didn't need to. He's a one-man dog. I knowed he wouldn't be comin' back here after he found old John's body; he wouldn't leave it. But old John ain't dead. He sent that dog back. You didn't croak him!"

"You fool," Jake bellowed. "With the dog dead old John was no problem. I'd fix him if he showed up. Like you said, there's no use antagonizing the law with a murder. That dog was our big danger. And you welched."

"You tried to trick me!" Red cried in a livid rage. "You never meant to kill him yourself, but you tried to trick me into doin' it."

"We're treed!" Jake snarled. "If you had clubbed the dog this wouldn't have happened."

Jake was coming toward him, his big face furious, his powerful hands groping. Red backed away. He had a gun in the holster under his shirt, but he dared not use it. The shot would arouse the Gulch. He gripped his knife savagely. He was good with a knife.

Jake sprang at him, his big hand reaching for Red's right wrist. But Red ducked under the swing of that long arm and his ready blade left a quickly reddening slash in Jake's shirt front as it ripped downward from his chest.

Jake roared at the bite of the blade, whirled and charged like a bull. This time Red's nimble footwork did not suffice. Jake's long arm swept him within its clutch and the big hands closed around his neck.

Terror seized Red. His breath was cut off and he felt that his neck must break under the pressure of those powerful hands. But the thought dominated his mind that he must not lose his head. He still had his knife and he was good with a knife.

With the strength of desperation he swung the weapon and he felt the blade grit into the heavy cartilage of Jake's ribs. Jake's body jerked spasm-like, but the pressure on Red's throat did not relax.

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The snaking, metal-tipped blacksnake whip that Bullwhip Bill McCrackin carried looped around his shoulder could be used either way: Either to herd four treacherous, shoot-in-the-back lawmen into forgotten desert graves—or to fashion a leather hangrope that would fit snugly around his own wrinkled, rawhide-tough neck!

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Trying for a vital spot he swung again and again. Then suddenly downward. Reluctantly his fingers relaxed their strangle hold, and big Jake sprawled to the floor. From beneath him little rivulets of red threaded out crazily in search of depressions in the floor.

Red staggered back against the table, frantically massaging his throat while he coaxed breath back into his tortured lungs. For a moment his knees threatened to buckle, but slowly normal breathing was restored, and with it strength.

He looked down upon the heap which had been Jake and a strange exhileration swept over him. Jake, the wary one, was dead! All his caution and careful scheming had done no good. He, Idaho Red, who met conditions as they came. And he had the loot. And it needed no dividing. It was his, all his.

Red hefted first his own shirt-bound loot, and then the leather bag which had been Jake's. Each was pleasingly heavy. Together they made a weight and bulk which presented the problem of ready and inconspicious transportation back to the horses. Not that he expected to be seen by any one; but there was always the possibility.

He rummaged around in the shelves of the cabin and unearthed an old gunny sack, probably one in which old John had brought potatoes. Men often carried groceries and supplies in gunny sacks. With the loot in that sack swung over his shoulder he would attract no particular attention nor arouse any suspicion even if seen by some citizen of the Gulch.

He sacked the loot, shouldered it, grinned triumphantly down at the fallen Jake, then cautiously removed the door bar and peered out to see if the coast was clear.

A BLURRED streak of fury rushed at him through the opening. Red sprang back with a gulp of terror. In the excitement of the past few minutes he had forgotten about the dog. His heel caught on Jake's body and he sprawled backward. His head struck the edge of the upturned stove, and darkness engulfed him.

Consciousness came back to Red in horrified jerks. The dog! It was leaping at him when he fell. He was conscious of a sound and as he recognized it a fresh chill of terror seized him. It was the close-by panting of the dog! Through a crimson mist he could see the big brute crouched three feet away watching him, every muscle tense, ready to spring.

A terror such as no other earthly danger could create chilled Red to the bones. He knew that he was weak and dazed, but these dangers meant nothing. That big dog was crouched there eager for some movement to arouse him to attack. Red was afraid of dogs.

He had lost his knife, but he remembered the gun in his shoulder holster. He lifted his hand slowly, very slowly. But the movement did not escape old Trotter's watchful eye. With a ferocious growl he leaped. His paws struck Red in the chest a breath-taking blow and his fangs glistening a bare six inches from Red's throat.

Frozen by terror, Red remained rigid. For a long moment Trotter thus menaced him, then he backed slowly away and crouched again, alert and suspicious and ready to spring at the slightest movement. Red's hand would never reach that gun. As securely as cuffs of steel could have done, Red was held Trotter's prisoner by the paralysis of fear.

Old John, concerned by Trotter's failure to return to the mine, came hurrying up to the cabin. He carried an old single-barrel shotgun.

With astonishment and a cocked gun he surveyed the scene of carnage. Old Trotter acknowledged his presence by a wag of the tail, but his eyes never wavered from Red. John removed Red's gun and picked up the knife and tossed them upon the table.

"It sort o' looks like you boys had a fallin' out," he remarked.

Red tried to speak, to plead for old John to call off the dog. But his vocal muscles refused to do his bidding. He moved his lips to encourage speech. Instantly the dog snarled. The half-formed appeal died in a choke of fear. Red dared not even move his lips; he dared not speak.

Old John hefted the two parcels of loot and carefully compared their weight.

"They had it divided as even as a man could without a pair of balances," he informed old Trotter. "Couldn't have been fussin' over the split of it. I wonder what in tarnation they got to fightin' about?"

SECOND-STRING HEROES

THEIR SADDLES EMPTY, THEIR GUNS AND LAUGHTER STILLED, BUT THE WEST THEY BUILT LIVES ON

by ROBBINS AND WAGGENER

LONGFELLOW GAINES

1

When the Sheriff of Weaversville, California ran the tinhorn Barton brothers and their traveling sideshow out of town at gunpoint in 1871, there was one performer that the posse overlooked. His name was Longfellow Gaines, and the reason he was missed in the scuffle was his height—a mere 45 inches.

2

Climbing out of the flour sack, where he had hidden when the shooting began, the little midget stayed in Weaversville, determined to prove that he was any man's equal. He tried to ride a bronc—and was thrown 25 feet. He tried prospecting—and was buried to his ears in a gravel slide.

3

"Better go home before a coyote steals you," jeered a local wit, and the town roared. But Longfellow, burning with humiliation, went to work as a teller at the Land Exchange Bank—the job was going begging because a dozen money-counters had already fallen that year before bandit guns.

4

Sure enough, the end of the first week found the midget staring into the mouth of a shotgun nearly the size of his own head. "Hand over the gold, shrimp!" snarled the highwayman. The epithet was his biggest mistake. Throwing his own sixgun to his shoulder like a rifle, Longfellow coolly blew the outlaw's nose off. Later, married to a pretty Harvey waitress, the diminutive hero raised three six foot sons. Weaversville was careful never to call him "Shorty" again.

The Man Who Tamed

Bad gun-trouble loomed in the Panhandle, with the shoestring ranchers pitted against the mighty Crown spread. And in the middle stood the Hannegan brothers, who would rather die fighting for the odds-on chance to bring freedom and peace to that war-torn range, than keep on living under the ruthless gun-power and greed-mad Matt Wyler.

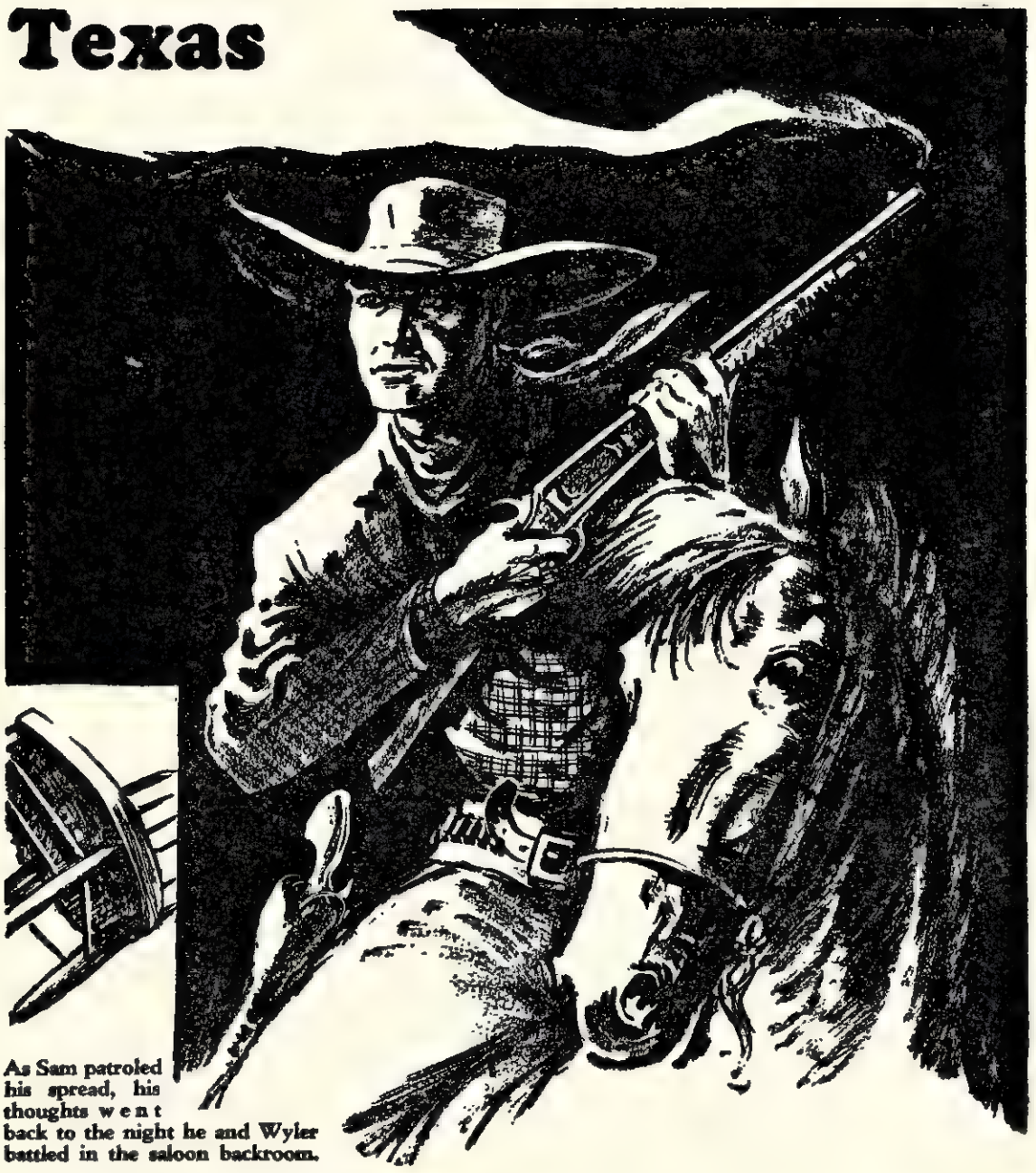
CHAPTER TWO

A Talk With Matt Wyler

THE little immigrant from Dublin, Pat Hannegan, always boasted, "Faith, and it's two foine boys I'll have to bless me old age." And wherever he worked—as mucker, carpenter, track-layer, bartender or swamper—Pat would whip any man who doubted that his two sons would turn out as he planned.

Maybe the fault lay in the Irishman himself, drifting about the country as he did and raising his motherless sons in one tough camp or wild town after another. At any rate, young Tom Hannegan didn't become a politician as the old man wished.

Texas



As Sam patroled his spread, his thoughts went back to the night he and Wyler battled in the saloon backroom.

Action Frontier Novel

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Nor did Sam become a priest of God.

Only the fact that his two boys set Pat up in business, a long cherished dream of his, kept his heart from breaking. Pat Hannegan's Shamrock Saloon at Estacada was the biggest in all the Texas Panhandle. Yet there were times, despite the prosperous Shamrock, when Pat all but disowned the pair of worthless scamps. They got mixed up in the Crown Ranch war, the bloody feud that rocked the entire Panhandle, on opposing sides. And Old Pat figured he was caught in the middle of it.

Sam Hannegan, the older son, always

chuckled when told that his old man's Irish ire was roused. Sam didn't take Pat too seriously. But his brother, Tom, was something else again. Tom Hannegan had brains, while Sam credited himself only with brawn. So far, brawn had been enough —especially when it was backed up a six-gun. Sam Hannegan had started ranching on Traders' Creek, in '81, with two hundred head of cattle and a string of ten saddle horses. He now counted, three years later, twenty-seven hundred cattle under his S-H brand. But the count was a tally book count. With rustlers on the prowl and the Spanish fever in epidemic, a range count would tell a different story.

Sam was loading a spring wagon with salt for the range when Mateo, one of his riders, said, "Riders coming, boss. Trouble, maybe."

Sam swung around, squinted against the sun, and saw two horse-backers approaching from the west. He said, "Get your shotgun, amigo, and fort up in the barn. But don't make a move unless I pull my six-gun."

The Mexican grinned, murmured, *"Si,"* and went to follow orders.

Sam leaned against the wagon and rolled a smoke as he waited for the two riders to come up. He wasn't sure that they meant trouble, but it was a time when a man needed caution. The pair took their time, and Sam finally understood why they rode at so slow a pace. One of them was a girl. It was Virginia King of Crown Ranch. And young Tom Hannegan who rode beside her now, was in love with Virginia King; he wore his heart on his sleeve, so everybody would know it. Seeing them together made Sam feel a sharp stab of envy. He guessed he too was a little in love with Virginia King.

They came in at an easy lope, the last couple hundred yards, and reined in by the barn. Sam knew their visit meant trouble, but it would not be shooting trouble. He dropped his quirly butt, ground it under his boot heel. He was a big man, slow, deliberate—careful. He stepped forward smiling warily.

"Hello, Ginny," he said. "How are you, Tom?"

The girl smiled back. She was tall and slender, a pretty girl with a wealth of auburn hair. Sam liked the way she sat her big sorrel; he liked the carefree way her hat hung at her shoulders by it's chin cord, so that her hair was free and wind-tousled. Tom gave him a sheepish grin. He was twenty-six, a blocky fair-skinned townsman. A lawyer by profession, and in Crown Ranch's hire, Tom was getting along in the world. Sam figured Old Pat should be proud of Tom, even though the youngster wasn't a politician.

Tom said, "I'm all right, Sam. Except for some worrying."

"What do you have to worry about?"

"You should know," Tom told him. "Things are getting out of hand."

"What things?"

"Ginny, this brother of mine should have been the lawyer," Tom said, glancing at the girl. He always makes the other party do all the talking." He looked back at his rancher-brother. "You know what I mean, Sam. This crazy feud between Crown Ranch and you little ranchers. It's growing into a range war. Two Crown riders were shot from ambush last night, and it's only by luck that both weren't killed."

"You come here to say I had a hand in it?" Sam said, his face turned rocky. "If so, you'd better ride out—pronto."

"It's not that, Sam," the girl said quickly. "Tom and I thought we'd come ask you to take a hand—and restrain the little ranchers. They're organizing to make war on Crown, and dad—Jeff King—is working himself into a rage. He's ready to fight back."

Tom took it up again, talking now as though he were in court pleading a case. "If Jeff King strikes back, he won't quit until he's rid the Panhandle of you greasy-sack ranchers, Sam. He's put up with a lot since he came here eight years ago. Most of the little ranchers got their start by mavericking—and it was Crown cattle they put their brands to. He's got no grudge against you, because he believes you're not fighting him. But if the others go, you'll go too. You know that."

"Dammit, don't threaten me!"

"I'm not threatening you, Sam. This is a friendly talk."

BUT Sam wouldn't take it that way. His ruddy face was dark with sudden rage. "Look; Jeff King started this dirty game," he said flatly. "You san say what you want

about him wanting peace—and about him having no grudge against me. But he's hurt me—hurt me bad."

"How so?" Tom demanded. "He's never made a move against you."

"He's rigged you up with blinders," Sam retorted. "He and a couple other big outfits started a Winchester quarantine to keep southern trail herds away from the Panhandle ranges—so those South Texas longhorns wouldn't spread the fever among the Panhandle herds. That was all right; it was fine. But last fall Jeff King buys up two thousand of those tick-carrying South Texas longhorns and turns them loose on the Panhandle graze. Maybe you can't see what happened. Maybe I should take you out to look at the herds!"

"No need for that," Tom told him. "I know."

"You only think you know," Sam fired at him. "You sit in an office in Estacada and never see the cattle suffering and dying from the fever!"

"Jeff King made a mistake," Tom stated. "And he's paying for it."

"Maybe so. But he can stand the loss," Sam went on. "He's rich, and he can take a cut of a few thousand cattle—while men like me can't take a loss of a few hundred head. I know of a dozen little ranchers facing bankruptcy, just because Jeff King brought in those tick-spreading Texas cattle." He shook his head. "No; you can't soft talk me into siding Jeff King!"

For once, Tom was without words. But Virginia said, "Then you'll let this thing go on, Sam—until it becomes a bloody range war?"

"Not that," Sam told her. "I'm just keeping out of it."

She gazed at him with sudden doubt, and said, "That's not like you. You were always a man to understand." Her voice rose with sudden anger. "It's not Jeff King who wants trouble. No matter what you think, he's not trying to get rid of you little ranchers. I may be only a woman, but I can see what's going on. And it's a group of small ranchers out to smash Jeff King's Crown Ranch!"

Sam said bitterly, "You and Tom do a lot of accusing."

"Why not?" Virginia retorted. "Why not, when it's true?"

"Still, you've come to the wrong man."

"I guess you're right," she said. "Maybe we should have gone to see Matt Wyler. He's the man behind the trouble, and we're almost certain he planned that ambush last night. We thought you'd be able to see things clearly—and take steps to stop Matt Wyler." She gathered up her reins. "Come along, Tom. We'll see that no-good Matt Wyler."

That jolted Sam Hannegan, for he knew what Wyler was like. He said bluntly, "No, you don't. You go to Wyler's place and accuse him of causing this trouble, and there'll be hell to pay." He looked at his brother. "You know that, Tom. Wyler's trigger-crazy. He'd gun you down for crossing him. You get back to Crown Ranch."

It was Virginia who said, "Then you'll take Wyler in hand, Sam?"

Sam Hannegan looked hard at her. He might kick like a mule not wanting to be packed, but in the end he would give in—to Virginia. He gave her a sheepish grin.

"I'll see Matt Wyler," he said.

Virginia rewarded him with a bright smile, but Tom was sullen and merely nodded as they turned their horses away. Sam Hannegan watched them ride back across the rolling grass flats, his feelings mixed up. He knew that Virginia had baited him into an ugly business, yet he had no one to blame but himself. A man made a fool of himself for a woman only because he wanted to. He turned as Mateo came from the barn, the shotgun under his arm. Mateo's dusky face was a little frightened.

"You mean that, boss? You're riding to see that lobo, Matt Wyler?"

"That's right, amigo," Sam said. "And you're going with me—with that scattergun. I may need somebody siding me."

MATT WYLER'S place was eighteen miles east, close to the Canadian River. Wyler's ranch headquarters stood in a hollow ringed around by brush and rocks and, on the river side, by a dense stand of cedar. The ranch buildings were of log, but the house was a square fort of stone with a tin roof and a double-thick door and loopholes for windows. Matt Wyler's backtrail was a dim one, but gossip had it that he had outlawed all through New Mexico and Arizona and down across the

Border before coming to the Panhandle—a year ago.

A crude sign—the letters burnt into the wood with a running iron—faced Sam Hannegan and Mateo as they rode up to the natural rock barrier. It read: WYLER RANCH—Keep The Hell Out!

Sam grinned, and said, "Sounds like Matt," but Mateo merely rolled his eyes.

They passed the sign post, threaded their way through the boulders, put their mounts down a short slope, and slow-walked up to the Wyler headquarters. Evidently Wyler believed his scattered signs would keep visitors away, for no guards came to head off Sam and his companion. Four tough looking riders were busy in a corral at the far end of the hollow. They had a branding fire going, and a half-yearling had just been roped for the hot iron. A dozen other calves were in a pen adjoining the corral. Sam knew the Wyler crew was doing some mavericking. The calves had been gathered from the open range, taken from the cows that had mothered them, and now no man could prove their ownership. It was a form of rustling that in the old free and easy days had been accepted; now it was one of the sore points festering the relationship between big ranchers and the little men.

The Wyler hands were unaware of visitors until Sam Hannegan reined in by the corral fence, then they halted their work and turned hostile.

Cash Hooker demanded, "What you want, Hannegan?"

"A talk with Matt Wyler."

"He ain't here."

"Where is he?"

"He left for Estacada this morning, to get a wagonload of supplies."

Sam nodded, eying Cash Hooker and trying to figure out if the man was telling the truth. Hooker was a scowling black-browed hardcase; his surname fitted him, for he had a big hooked beak for a nose.

"Doing some mavericking, eh, Cash?"

"That's none of your business, Hannegan," Hooker shot back. "And you got no call to ride in here. Can't you read?"

"I can read, Cash," Sam retorted, "but maybe I don't believe in signs." He glanced back at Mateo, made sure that the Mex had his shotgun across his saddle horn. Then he crossed his hands on the pommel and leaned a little forward. He stared straight into Cash Hooker's beady eyes. "I hear Matt was in on the ambush last night," he said. "Two Crown riders got plugged. What was the idea? Did those riders catch Matt Wyler cutting calves out of a Crown herd?"

Hooker shifted his gaze. He didn't say anything. The other three Wyler hands looked uneasy; they kept eying Mateo's shotgun.

Sam went on, still baiting Cash Hooker, "Just why was the ambush pulled? Were you in on it, Cash?"

Hooker growled, "Damn you, Hannegan! You can't fix that on me. I didn't ride with Wyler last night. I can prove it!"

"All right, all right," Sam told him, grinning. "I'm not worried about you. All I wanted to know was if Wyler was in on the ambush—and you've just about told me he was."

Hooker cursed him again, obscenely, and laid his hand on his gun butt. Sam said softly, "Now, Mateo," and there was a metallic click as the vaquero thumbed back the hammer of his deadly scattergun. Some of the rage left Hooker. Nothing put fear in a sixgun packing hardcase like the threat of a shotgun. A sixgun left a comparatively clean wound; a burst of scatter shot, at close range, could turn a man into a bloody mess. These Wyler hands were sixgun men. Cash Hooker shrugged.

"I just work for Wyler," he said. "Lay off me, Hannegan."

"Sure, Cash," Sam told him. Then told Mateo, "Keep them covered until I get back to the rocks, then I'll cover you with my rifle. I wouldn't risk turning both our backs to these gun-wolves."

He swung away, knowing the Mex would side him all the way. Mateo was always scared and nervous at the prospect of trouble, but when it was face to face with him he stood up well. They worked it like that; up among the rocks, Sam drew his Winchester and called, "Come along, amigo," and Mateo came riding out without the Wyler hands drawing their guns. Once away from the fortlike ranch, Sam and his vaquero swung southeast toward Estacada.

THE town stood by the Canadian and was a stopover on the trail to Dodge City. It had a population of over seven

hundred people, and some of its optimistic boosters claimed it had a future. Estacada's prosperity depended upon the big trail herds from southern Texas and from farther west—from New Mexico and Arizona—all hellbent for the railroad at Dodge, and upon the business of the surrounding ranches.

There were two big stores and three small ones. The town boasted a blacksmith shop, two livery barns, a drug store, a lumber yard, some one-man shops, and five saloons. Pat Hannegan's Shamrock Saloon was the biggest and the little red-faced Dubliner played no favorites. Both Panhandle factions—riders for the big outfits or small ranchers—were welcome to drink, buck the tiger, or dance with his percentage girls. "It's a man of peaceful inclinations that I am, begorra!" so proclaimed Pat Hannegan.

It was a Saturday evening, when Sam and Mateo rode into town, and Estacada's main street, Liberty, was crowded and busy. Having ridden far, they put their mounts up at Barker's livery, then went to the Trail House dining-room for a meal. From the hotel, they went to the Shamrock.

Pat Hannegan met them just inside the door, and he was having one of his spells of being put out with his unmanageable sons. "You'll bring no shotgun in here, you outlander," he told Mateo. "As for you, Sam Hannegan," he said, swinging on his son like a bantam rooster, "you will be doing no shooting in my place."

"Now why should I do any shooting, Pat?"

"Pat, he says! A foine way to address your father," the saloonman ranted. "I tell you why you're apt to be shooting up the place. You and your friends ambushed two Crown lads last night. Faith, and it's a shame."

Sam sobered. "I had nothing to do with it, Pop," he said, and took the little man by the arm. "Come on. I'll buy you a drink at your own bar." Then, at the busy mahogany, he went on, "Look, Pop; who told you I had something to do with that ambush?"

"You're one of them that's making war on King's Crown, ain't you?"

"Not me," Sam said. "And if Tom told you I was—"

"Now don't be calling your own flesh-and-blood a liar!" Sam's eyes snapped.

"So he did tell you."

"Mr. Tom Hannegan and I ain't speaking," Pat Hannegan stated. "Any man that passes up a foine chance to run for public office to hire out to a bloody Englishman is no better than a man who refused to be taking up the priesthood. Meaning, Sam Hannegan, yourself!"

"So the Irish are still fighting the English," Sam said, chuckling. "Shucks, Pop; Jeff King left England fifty years ago."

"All the same, it's a overbearing proud Limey that he is. And if he walked in here right now, the Saints forbid!—I'd throw him out!"

Sam downed his drink, then faced about. Looking across the smoke-fogged crowded room, he saw Tom Hannegan enter and hold open the swing doors for his companion—Jeff King. The owner of the Crown Ranch was a fine figure of a man, carrying himself with that stiff pride of the English upper class. He was ruddy-faced, snow white of mustache and hair. He halted just inside the doors, looking about unsmilingly.

"The devil himself," muttered little Pat Hannegan, and started around the gambling tables—with hand outstretched and a wide grin on his Irish face.

Amused, Sam left the bar and made his way to a table where a woman was dealing faro. Five men sat around the table, one of them Matt Wyler. The woman smiled up at Sam as she drew a card from her deal box. Cameo Marvin had a special smile for Sam Hannegan; he had long ago noticed that.

He smiled back, nodded, then watched the game. And the girl.

Cameo was so named from the ring on her right hand—her left was bare of jewelry—and from the huge brooch on her jade green dress. She seemed to love cameos; she apparently had hundreds of them, in rings and pins, and sometimes she even wore small ones in her pretty ears. Her right name, Sam knew, was Mollie O'Rourke, and she was the daughter of a gambler who had come across the Atlantic on the same sailing ship with Pat Hannegan—and who some years ago had gone to a gambler's reward, having been too slow in drawing his derringer.

Cameo had been coached by Shane O'Rourke, and, if she knew nothing else, she could not be beaten when it came to handling the pasteboards. Out of friendship for her dead father, Pat Hannegan had given her a real deal here in the Shamrock. And the blonde beauty of the girl drew men as molasses drew flies.

Sam Hannegan could look at Cameo Marvin and feel his pulses speed up, but always in the back of his mind was the picture of Virginia King. There was no comparing the two women; Virginia was only twenty, and Cameo was close to thirty. Virginia was the sort who kept herself for one man, the man she would marry, and Cameo, with her smile and low-cut dresses, gave something of herself to every man's eyes.

"Sit in, Sam?" Cameo invited.

She wanted him there, not to take his money but because, her manner told him, she liked his company. But Sam shook his head.

"I just dropped in for a talk with Matt Wyler," he said.

CHAPTER TWO

Ultimatum on the Crown

MATT WYLER'S head jerked up. "What's that?" he demanded. He was a big brute of a hardcase, his heavy face marked by scars and the ugliness of his nature. He had a traplike mouth, a fist-flattened nose, and small, dark eyes that glinted with cold light. He was a man who had lived hard, and there was power in him. Unlike most of the tough breed, Matt Wyler was innately shrewd. He looked up at Sam Hannegan with sudden caution, suspecting something had gone wrong.

"Let's have it in private," Sam told him. "What I've got to say you won't want anybody else to hear."

Wyler frowned over that, then growled, "All right," and shoved back his chair. He followed Sam toward the far end of the bar, where a door led to a couple of private poker rooms. But they were turned about by Jeff King's voice booming out, "One minute, Wyler."

There was in the Shamrock a sudden hush. The pianist stopped his music and the percentage girls stopped dancing with their cowpoke companions. Men halted their talk, and the professional gamblers took time out. Everyone in the big saloon knew that there was feud trouble between old Jeffrey King and the little ranchers such as Matt Wyler. And everyone wanted to hear this.

Wyler was grinning, cocksure of himself, and he ordered, "Say your piece, old man. I'm listening."

King shook off Tom Hannegan's restraining hand and strode forward until he faced the hardcase. He was not a tall man, yet he gave the impression that he was looking down on burly Matt Wyler. He spoke almost politely.

"I'm giving you a warning, Wyler," he said. "You ambushed two of my employes last night, with intent to kill. I'll stand for no more of that. If another gun is drawn against Crown Ranch, I'll turn my whole crew against the men I think are responsible."

"You got proof that I ambushed your men, King?"

"I need none, Wyler. I know."

"You know nothing at all," Matt Wyler retorted. "I can produce witnesses who'll swear I wasn't near the spot where two Crown riders were shot. As for your warning, old man, you can take it straight to hell. I can't be bluffed."

He swung away from the old cattleman, leaving him and the gaping crowd surprised into silence. Never before had Matt Wyler let himself be slapped in the face with an ugly accusation. He muttered, "Come along, Hannegan. I'll listen to what you've got to say—but it'd better be good."

Sam Hannegan couldn't figure it. For some reason, Matt Wyler was playing cagey. When they faced each other in a small back room, with a deal table between them, Sam realized that the hardcase was more dangerous than ever. It seemed that he had learned how to keep his ugly temper in check. He lighted a cigar, gave Sam a mocking grin, and said, "Well, let's have it."

"I kept quiet outside because I'm not siding Jeff King in any game he may be playing," Sam stated. "I don't know whether he deliberately brought in those southern cattle to spread the Spanish fever among our herds—or if he just made a darn fool mistake. If he did it on purpose,

as some claim, to hurt the rest of us ranchers, then I sure don't want to side him."

"Say what you've got to say, Hannegan."

"You were in on that ambush, Matt."

"Who says I was?" Wyler demanded, his good humor fading.

"Your man Cash Hooker," Sam told him. "I stopped by your place today. Hooker and your other hands were branding some calves that had been brought in off the range. Maybe you call it mavericking, Matt, but it sure looked like rustling to me." He paused, watching the man's face turn dark and stiff. "Hooker let it slip that you'd been in on the ambush."

Wyler didn't say anything.

Sam went on, "I figured I'd have a talk with you, and try to make you see what's sensible. You've been using a long rope and a running iron ever since you hit these parts a year ago. That was bad enough. But when you start using guns against Crown Ranch, you're asking for trouble that'll hit every man within a hundred miles of Estacada. I'm telling you, Matt, to pull up—now, before it's too late."

"And suppose I don't quit?" Wyler said savagely. "What'll you do?"

"If you won't listen to reason," Sam told him, "I can pound some sense into you. You've got a reputation for being a tough customer, Matt, and you've thrown a scare into most everybody within a day's ride of here. But not me, Matt. Not Sam Hannegan!"

Wyler was no longer cagey. The reins on his temper were weak threads, and they snapped now. He burst out, "Why, you two-bit son—"

Sam reached across the table and slapped Matt Wyler across the face. It was more of an insult than the blow of a fist, and Wyler's wild temper flared. He grabbed at his sixgun, but Sam shoved the deal table against him with so much force Wyler slammed back to the wall. Sam grabbed up a chair and flung it into Wyler's face as the man's gun came clear. Wyler cried out in pain. His gun roared, the shot going into the floor. Sam lunged in, throwing the deal table aside. Blood was streaming down Wyler's pain-twisted face. The chair had cut him over the left eye and seemed to have broken his nose. He was dazed, and so permitted Sam to wrench the gun from his hand. Wyler had no fight left.

Sam flung open the door. Mateo was in the hall with his gun drawn and some other men from the barroom were crowding in. Sam jabbed Wyler with the gun, "Out, Matt—ahead of me!"

Wyler obeyed, stumbling like a drunk. Sam shoved him out into the center of the big barroom, then halted him.

Sam said to the watching crowd, "Take a look at him, folks. If you can't recognize him for the blood, it's tough Matt Wyler. I was having a little talk with him. I told him his starting a range war with Crown was no blamed good, and he didn't like it. He drew his gun on me. . . ." He paused, grinning a little, looking about.

HIS brother and his father were there in the crowd with old Jeff King. He saw too some of the little Panhandle ranchers, and their hands. He had a glimpse of Cameo Marvin. The girl looked frightened—for him.

"Not that I'm bragging," Sam went on. "It's just that I want everybody to know that Matt Wyler's not as tough as he told us. No need now for any of us to knuckle down to him."

He broke the sixgun, took the loads from it, then dropped it at Wyler's feet. He said, "Clear out, Wyler. I'm sick of the sight of you."

Wyler didn't pick up his gun. He lurched to the swing doors, halted there and muttered, "This is only the beginning of it, Hannegan. I'll end it another time—in my own way."

He went out, and for a long moment there was a heavy silence in the Shamrock. Then little Pat Hannegan sang out, "Drinks on the house, gents. Line up!"

Almost everyone sought the long bar, but two men came up to Sam. Chris Bailey and John Burton were small ranch owners. Both looked worried. Bailey said, "Sam, who the hell are you siding—Jeff King?"

"You boys know better than that."

"Then why jump Wyler?" John Burton growled. "He's the only man with guts enough to buck King and his thieving Crown Ranch."

"Because I figure Wyler's bringing trouble down on all of us."

The two men worried with that a mo-

ment, then Bailey said, "Sam, we're holding a meeting at my spread tomorrow afternoon. We're going to discuss our troubles. We'd sure like you to be there."

"Thanks for the invitation," Sam replied. "I accept."

Bailey and Burton went to the bar for their free drinks, then Cameo Marvin came and touched Sam's arm. Cameo was worldly wise; it was possible that she understood men far better than they understood themselves. And she was worried.

"Sam, he'll lay for you," she whispered. "He'll never forget that he lost face because of you. A bullet in the back. . . ."

Sam saw her shudder, and some of her fear must have communicated itself to him. For suddenly he felt uneasy.

IT WASN'T unusual for a bunch of cowpunchers to ride through a cowtown on a Saturday night, yelling like Comanches and shooting off their sixguns. That was the accepted way they worked off some of their whiskey-raised spirits. It was considered a form of good, clean fun. . . . When it happened that night in Estacada, nobody paid much attention—at first. It was about ten o'clock. Four riders started shooting down at Barker's livery, at the south end of town. They came loping along Liberty Street, still shooting and yelling. Somebody went to the door of the Shamrock and looked out, then said, "Some Crown hands pulling out."

But a minute later, somebody yelled for help. Word came that a man had been killed down by Barker's livery. Sam Hannegan was one of the first to run from the Shamrock. When he reached the livery barn, half a dozen men were standing about a crumpled form on the ground. The dead man was Bud Harlan, who had ranched a dozen miles east of Matt Wyler's place. Sam Hannegan asked what had happened.

"Those Crown hands jumped him," Hank Barker, the liveryman, told him. "They accused him of having been with Matt Wyler last night when the two Crown riders were shot. Bud had a chance to deny it, but he wouldn't lie. Stub Ward, one of the Crown riders, gave Bud a chance to draw his gun. Bud was a little slow."

The crowd came then, to stare and ask morbid questions. Russ Malone, the town marshal, questioned Barker who was the only witness. But only one conclusion could be drawn; it hadn't been an accident, yet it hadn't been murder as murder was known in the cow country. Bud Harlan had been given a chance. And he'd died with gun in hand.

Sam Hannegan was first to turn away, hating the sight of violent death and not liking the angry muttering that rose. He saw how it would be. Bud Harlan had been a young fellow; it'd only been six months ago that he had quit his riding job with John Burton to start up for himself. He had been well liked, and now, in death, he would have more friends than ever. In the minds of a lot of men, Bud Harlan would seem a martyr. There would be talk of revenge. It would not matter that Bud had made a mistake by taking part in an ambush. That would be forgotten.

Sam walked along thinking of how things worked out. First there had been wide-scale mavericking, then rustling. Big ranchers and their loyal hands had accused the little ranchers. Then Crown Ranch had brought in those tick-carrying southern cattle. And accusations had become flying lead. Men talked first, then grabbed for their sixguns. They figured a six-gun could settle any problem.

Sixguns had blazed in that ambush. Matt Wyler had grabbed for his sixgun tonight, there in the back room of the Shamrock. Bud Harlan was dead because he had packed such a weapon—and because the Crown riders had been so armed. When a man dressed in the morning, he belted on his gun. It was a part of his attire, as much as his boots or jeans. Sam himself never moved away from his cabin without his sixgun. *Why?* he wondered. *Why does a man have to go armed?* He told himself it was because men were always at war with each other, yet somehow the answer did not wholly satisfy him.

He turned into the Shamrock, and it was all but empty. Most of the customers had gone to the livery barn for a look at the dead man. Jeff King was gone, but he had left town an hour or more ago. Tom Hannegan was there at the bar, however, talking to Old Pat. Tom's boyish face showed his troubled thoughts.

"This is the start of it," he said bluntly. "But it wasn't planned, Sam. Jeff King didn't know about it."

"You came begging me to stop Wyler," Sam retorted, "then you let the Crown crew go right ahead."

"They're all the same breed of men."

"What do you mean by that?"

"You know what I mean," Tom growled. "Crown men or independent ranchers, they all figure a sixgun is the only law. Something has got to be done in this country. We've got to have a court house and a grand jury. We've got to have lawmen. Damn it, I have a notion to go to the Governor and ask for Rangers!"

"Sure," Sam said. "The Rangers will come and quiet things down. Then they'll be sent somewhere else, and the shooting will start all over. You could bring in your lawmen and your courts, but it wouldn't settle anything. Men will still settle their differences with their guns."

"Then how would you stop it?"

"If I was a smart lawyer like you," Sam said, "I'd find a way." He was sore and could not help it. He kept thinking of Bud Harlan lying dead in the street. "You better tell Jeff King to keep his men away from Estacada until the worst of this blows over."

"A bright idea," Tom said sarcastically. "All King has to do is lock up forty or fifty men every night. Sure, I'll tell him."

"That's no more crazy than your wanting me to tie up Matt Wyler," Sam said, and turned angrily away.

Cameo followed him from the Shamrock, and said, "Must you ride tonight, Sam?"

He looked at her, and his anger let up. He gave her an amused smile. "Are you afraid Matt Wyler will jump me on the trail?" he asked.

"Maybe, Sam."

"Cameo, you don't see anything in me?"

"Don't I, though?" the girl said, with sudden bitterness. "Well, forget it. Ride out and take your chances with Matt Wyler. As for me, I can be lonely another night." She was smiling but her eyes were bleak. "I know men don't fall in love with women who hang out in honk-atonks, but sometimes such women don't ask for love. Sam, I heard Tom and your dad talking just before you came in. . . . I heard Tom

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say that you tackled Matt Wyler because Virginia King asked it. That's no good, Sam. Believe me. She'll make use of you. She'll smile at you, and her eyes will be full of promise. But in the end she'll marry Tom or somebody like him."

"You and I are pretty blunt with each other, Cameo."

"Don't start hating me," the girl pleaded. "I'm just trying to put you straight. Don't do any gun fighting for Virginia King, Sam. Or for any woman."

"All right, Cameo—all right."

Sam walked away, then paused and said, "Good night, Cameo." Later, riding away from town with Mateo, he kept thinking of her. Or rather, of what she had said about Virginia King.

SAM rode to the Bailey Ranch that Sunday afternoon. It was a fine spring day, and many of the ranchers had brought their womenfolk and children. Wagons and buggies stood all around the barn, and a couple dozen saddle horses were tied up to the corral fence. Some sixty men—ranchers and their hired hands—were present. Bailey's wife and two daughters had set up a table under a cottonwood tree by the side of the house, and it was loaded with cakes and sandwiches and coffee. For the women and kids, it was something of a picnic.

The rancher-owners gathered by the bunkhouse, keeping in the warm sunlight. There was some talk, but Bailey was waiting for a couple more men. Evidently Matt Wyler had an invitation, for he showed up with two of his hardcased riders. Wyler's nose was swollen and the cut over his left eye looked bad. He merely nodded in reply to greetings, and he ignored Sam Hannegan after one scowling look.

Chris Bailey called the meeting to order there in the open, said a few words about Bud Harlan and then talked about the trouble with Crown Ranch. He said little that was new to Sam Hannegan, at the start.

"Almost all of us did some mavericking in the beginning," Bailey stated. "After the war, that was the thing to do. That's how most of us got our start, putting our irons to wild cattle. Nowadays, the big ranchers call it rustling—cattle stealing—and I'm not saying they're wrong. But what gripes me is Jeff King bringing in cattle that spread Spanish fever. I figure I've lost more than half my Circle-B cattle to the fever, and it's a loss I can't stand. . . ."

He talked on, and came up with the plan of making a written estimate of each rancher's losses from the cattle disease. The estimate should be sent to Jeff King as a claim for damages. Bailey said that if King didn't pay up, they would know that he was out to ruin them.

Bailey went on, "I've got a friend in Mobeetie, and he wrote me a letter that I got yesterday. My friend's a contractor and he just took on a big job for Jeff King. Who knows what that job is, friends?"

No one answered at once, but finally Matt Wyler said, "Sure; King is going to fence in what land he claims as his own. He's going to fence the open range—grab the best graze for himself, and to hell with us little hombres."

Bailey nodded. "That's right. King claims he'll spend a hundred thousand dollars to string barbwire around what he says is the Crown Ranch. And I'm telling you, neighbors, when that fence goes up over a big chunk of the Panhandle, our days'll be numbered. We'll be crowded onto the poor graze. We'll be on the outside looking in!"

The talk exploded into anger. Men cursed Jeff King for a land thief. It was well known that King claimed that his Crown Ranch covered more than two million acres of the Panhandle. Sam Hannegan listened, but kept silent. He did not know whether King's fencing plan was good or bad; if the big rancher fenced, the little spread-owner could still graze cattle on the land he himself claimed. It simply meant that there would be no more throwing cattle of all brands together, and then, at round-up time, cutting them out for their respective owners. It also meant that mavericking—or rustling—would become a thing of the past. Sam suspected that some of these men who were now so indignant might be considering that fact—that a long rope and a running iron might become more or less useless—and did not like the thought.

Matt Wyler was loud in his denunciation of King. "We'll fight the fence," he swore. "We'll keep this range open—free for any man. If King squeezes us much harder, he'll bankrupt us and then take over our land and fence it in with his own."

He slapped his holstered gun. "If talk won't stop Jeff King, sixguns will!"

Sam frowned, and thought, *The sixgun again!* Everything had to be settled with a sixgun.

Bailey said, "Hannegan, how do you feel about it?"

"I'm with you on the damage-claim business," Sam told him, and the others. "King caused our losses to the Spanish fever, so I figure he should pay damages. If he'd pay up, it'd show that he doesn't mean to squeeze us out of the cattle business."

"King's a stubborn cuss," Bailey said.

"I could make my brother see reason," Sam said. "And Tom is King's lawyer. You trust me enough to handle the damage claim?"

"We'll vote on it," Bailey said.

The vote was taken, and only Matt Wyler dissented. The hardcase growled, "Hannegan's proved he's friendly toward King. He's no more one of us than his brother is. You let me present King with that bill for damages. I'll take my tough crew and collect with my guns."

He was shouted down. Matt Wyler had lost face last night at Sam's hands; the other ranchers no longer feared him.

A table and chair, pen and ink and paper were brought from the bunkhouse. John Burton, who once had been a schoolteacher, sat down and wrote out the damage claim. There were seventeen ranchers present, and each in turn estimated his cattle losses to the Spanish fever. Sam Hannegan knew that most of the claims were far too high, but he did not protest. If Jeff King made a fairly reasonable settlement, much of the range trouble would be ended.

Matt Wyler had turned sullen, and for a time Sam believed the man would leave the meeting. But Wyler merely talked to his two tough riders, and they mounted and rode away.

It was an hour before Burton had the paper drawn up to please everyone. The estimate stated that undersigned ranchers had lost approximately thirty-two thousand head of cattle through Crown Ranch's importation of tick-carrying stock. The demand for payment was sharply worded. Bailey gave the paper to Sam.

"How soon will you present it?" he asked.

"I'll start for Crown Ranch right now."

"You want any of us to ride along and side you?"

Sam shook his head. "I can handle this better, alone," he said.

CHAPTER THREE

Dirty Work

SAM headed north and rode up to his place on Traders' Creek at dusk. Mateo met him at the corral and took his horse, then said, "You got a *visitador*, boss. Cash Hooker."

Hooker was hunkered down by the door of Sam's cabin, pulling nervously on a quirly butt. His face was a raw mass, in far worse shape than Matt Wyler's after being hit with the chair. Sam said warily, "What's on your mind, Cash?"

"I'm ready to squeal," Hooker muttered. "I'm done being kicked around by Matt Wyler—the dirty son!" The hardcase ran through his vocabulary of oaths. "Wyler got in after midnight," he went on, "and yanked me out of my bunk. He started gun-whipping me for having let you think he was in on that ambush. Maybe I should hate your guts for that, but I figure you're a better sort than Matt Wyler any day."

"Go on, Cash."

"Sure. When I squeal, I do it right," Hooker went on. "Wyler's playing a big game, Hannegan. He came to the Panhandle with a big stake of outlaw loot. But he wasn't satisfied with that. Wyler wants to be a big man—mighty big—like Jeff King and Charlie Goodnight. He wants to be a topdog, with the little men looking up to him. And he's got what he figures is a sure-fire scheme. He's egging the little ranchers on, stirring them up against Jeff King. Then he baits King by rustling his stock and ambushing Crown riders. He wants to get a range war started."

"So one side will come out on top?"

"No; so both sides go down," Hooker stated. "Then he'll step in with a tough crew and take what he wants. If he can't take over Crown Ranch right off, he'll grab up the little ranches and combine them in one big spread. You want to know what his next step is, Hannegan?"

"I'm listening, Cash."

"Wyler is going to bushwhack one of the little ranchers—and blame it on King."

"Who's he picked, Cash?"

"Up until last night, he'd picked Chris Bailey," Hooker said. "But he was crazy mad last night after you whipped him. Now he's picked you. He'll be in the clear this time, because he's paying Charlie Wall and Pete Larue to get you."

"Those two toughs who were with him today?"

"Yeah; the three of them rode out for Bailey's ranch before I pulled my freight. Now you know, Hannegan. Do what you want. But I hope you drive Matt Wyler out of the Panhandle—or kill him!"

"How come you don't brace him, yourself?" Sam wanted to know.

Hooker shrugged. "I'm no gun-fighter," he said. "Wyler's too tough and smart for me. I'm pulling out of these parts now, before the lid blows off things. I'm headed for New Mexico."

Sam nodded. He believed Cash Hooker was telling the truth. He said, "Wait a minute, Cash. I'm obliged to you, and I pay my debts. Could you use a hundred-dollar stake?"

When Hooker was gone, Sam called to Mateo to saddle up a fresh horse. He ate a quick meal, then mounted and headed for Crown Ranch to deliver the damage-claim paper. As he rode across the dark plains, he kept thinking of what Cash Hooker had told him. And he kept thinking of how Matt Wyler had sent his two tough riders —Charlie Wall and Pete Larue—away from Bailey's ranch. He was uneasy in his mind. Being marked for ambush bullets gave a man an empty feeling deep inside.... Sam drew his Winchester from its boot and held it across the saddle horn.

It was a full thirty miles to Crown headquarters, and Sam knew that he would arrive too late to talk business with Jeff King. He would have to bunk with the crew, then see the rancher in the morning. Sam hoped that it would arrive in time to see Virginia, and talk a few words before she went to bed. He never had a chance to see enough of her. Sam was thinking of her when the first warning came. His horse, a big blue roan gelding, suddenly threw its head up and nickered. Sam reined in.

He was far across Crown range now, no more than seven miles from the ranch headquarters. Directly ahead was Deep Rut Arroyo, now partially awash. Brush and cedars grew along the arroyo, affording a screen from the silvery moonlight. It was possible that the roan had scented a coyote or one of the big gray wolves that prowled the river bottoms. Or a horse—or horses. Horses at that spot might mean men.

Sam peered about, held his breath and listened. He saw nothing, heard nothing. The roan stamped and switched. Lifting his rifle, Sam fired three quick shots into the thicket nearest the creek ford. A commotion broke out. There was a scurrying about, a ripped-out oath. Then a sixgun roared.

Pain exploded in Sam Hannegan. He went all limp, as though a part of him had collapsed. He heard a rusty voice bawl out, "Come on, Pete! I got him. Let's get out of here!"

Two riders galloped away from the ambush trap. Sam was only dimly aware of it. By then, he was sprawled in a heap on the ground.

HE LAY there for what seemed an eternity, then gradually his mind cleared and he knew he must do something or die there. His horse stood close by, and Sam had only to drag himself a little way. But it was agony. Worse still was getting to the saddle. He climbed hand over hand, dragged himself up. He clung first to the stirrup, up its strap; his numbed hands clawed at the saddle, came finally to the pommel.

He had difficulty remaining in the saddle; his will fought his weakness, but every jogging step of his mount exploded more pain. He forded Deep Rut and headed the roan toward the old Mexican plaza that had been converted into the headquarters of Jeff King's Crown Ranch. He didn't think he'd make it.

The roan halted finally, of its own accord, and Sam forced himself erect. He saw a corral fence just ahead and lighted windows off to the left. He shouted something, what he did not know, then a voice answered, "Coming. What's the trouble?"

After that, he could let himself go. He was lifted from his horse, carried into an adobe bunkhouse, placed on a bunk. Lamplight glared down upon him, sleepy cowpunchers stared at him. One of them said,

"This calls for a medico, sure, and quick."

IT TOOK time for a rider to get to Estacada and fetch young Doc Hadley, so it wasn't until mid-morning of the next day that Sam's wound was treated. An operation was performed under chloroform, then for two days it was touch and go. The third morning, when Doc Hadley came again, his patient was still as sick as a poisoned dog—but over the crisis. Tom had come out with the medico.

One of the Crown 'punchers had been acting as a nurse for Sam, and Doc Hadley had given him orders to turn away all visitors. The Crown hands had moved to another bunkhouse, for the time being, so Sam was glad to see his brother—even though they didn't see eye to eye on things. Tom's boyish face was worried, as usual.

"We tried to keep your being shot a secret," he said, "but everybody in Estacada found out about it, somehow. There's a lot of ugly talk. Folks believe you were shot by Crown riders and are now being held prisoner."

"I know who shot me," Sam said. "And I'll take care of the man to blame for it, soon as I'm on my feet."

"Who was it, Sam—Matt Wyler?"

"Two of his tough hands did the ambushing."

"You want me to take some men and round up that crew?"

"What men—Crown hands?" Sam said. "No. That'd start a war, for sure. The other ranchers would side Wyler, and too many men would die. You leave Wyler for me."

They fell silent, and Sam lay there silently cursing his helplessness. The way he felt, it would be weeks before he was himself again.

He said finally, "Tom, I always figured you were the only Hannegan with brains. But you haven't yet figured out a way to stop this loco trouble. It looks like you'll have to try a couple of my ideas."

Tom frowned, not liking that. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

Sam told him about the damage-claim, then Tom got it from the pocket of Sam's levis and read it through.

"It's no good," Tom said angrily. "Jeff King didn't bring in those cattle to spread tick-fever through the Panhandle. He's not that kind of a man, and he'll never pay on a claim like this."

"He'd be buying the good will of the little ranchers," Sam argued. "And that would stop a lot of this feuding."

"It's no use," Tom said. "I'll show this paper to King, but I know what his answer will be. Your idea is no good, Sam."

"Figured that," Sam said wearily. "But I've got another idea—one I've been thinking about for the past couple of days. It's this, Tom: the real trouble is caused by every hombre and his brother riding about armed to the teeth."

Tom looked puzzled.

"Every time a couple of men have a little fall-out," Sam went on, "they grab for their sixguns and start to shoot. There's no good reason nowadays for anybody to pack guns. The Indians are all held on reservations. The Comanchero trade was broken up years ago. There are no real wild bunches on the loose. You get it, Tom?"

"You mean it should be made unlawful for men to carry firearms?"

"That's it."

Tom shook his head. "It couldn't be done," he said. "The State legislature would have to pass a law, or the Governor issue a proclamation. And there'd be one big howl from one end of Texas to the other. Men would figure one of their rights was being taken away."

"It's worth a try," Sam said. "You're a lawyer, and you know some of those lawmakers at Austin. You could even talk to Governor Jim Hogg. If you took along letters of authority from Jeff King and some other big ranchers, you'd be sure to get a hearing."

Tom looked interested. But he said cautiously, "Supposing such a law was passed, who'd enforce it around these parts?"

"Most men are law-respecting," Sam told him. "If the law is passed, all but a few will obey it. And those few can be disarmed by the lawmen and the court you talked about setting up in Estacada."

"It's a loco idea, but it's worth a try," Tom said. "I'll start for Austin today."

When he was gone, Sam smiled faintly to himself. It would be a joke if a gun-toter like Sam Hannegan should be the cause of all Texas being disarmed!

THREE days after Tom left for Austin, Sam felt that he was ready to ride back to his own ranch. He asked Waco Hardin, the Crown hand who had been caring for him, to saddle up his roan horse. He got into his clothes, walked unsteadily out to the corral. When the roan was saddled, Sam told Waco, "I've got a fine buckskin stallion over at my place. He's just your kind of a horse, Waco."

"Shucks, Sam; you don't owe me anything."

"Still, stop by and take a look at the buckskin."

"All right," Waco said. "I'll do that."

Sam mounted and rode over to the big adobe ranchhouse to thank Jeff King for letting him stay in the Crown bunkhouse. The old rancher came to the door with Virginia. He looked older, and tired.

"You are always welcome here," King told him. "I hope you'll convince the rest of the countryside that it was not Crown riders who shot you."

"I'll do that, sir," Sam said. "But I'll have to report about that damage claim. Are you determined not to pay anything on it, Mr. King?"

"Absolutely," King said stiffly. "I'll never pay tribute."

"It would be an investment."

"I can't see it that way, Sam."

Sam nodded and said, "Too bad." He saw that Virginia was gazing at him with unconcealed hostility.

"I thought you were a sensible man," she told him. "But you're no different from the others. You blame Crown for everything that's happened. Crown Ranch was here first, and you little ranchers hate Jeff King because he has the biggest ranch and the most cattle—and in your envy, you'd like to ruin him!"

That hurt Sam Hannegan. He had placed himself in the middle of the feud, in the most dangerous spot of all. He hadn't expected men to understand that he was interested only in stopping this range war, but he had hoped that Virgina King would appreciate it. Now he knew that she could see only Crown's side of the ugly business, that she hated him for not throwing in with Crown. Just as Cameo Marvin had said, Virginia cared nothing at all about him except as a tool or a weapon to be used for Crown.

He said bitterly, "Maybe you're right. Maybe I'm like all the others when I think that Crown should do its share in avoiding trouble."

He swung his horse and rode away, feeling that he had been making a fool of himself for trying to arbitrate a dispute could only end in a real showdown fight.

* * *

Thirty miles had never seemed so great a distance. Sam was all in by the time he reached his place on Traders' Creek. He was met by Mateo and his other hired hand, Jeb Rigby, and they shook his hand and said they were sure glad to see him back. Jeb Rigby was a leathery-faced oldtimer, and he growled, "At first, Mateo and I aimed to ride to Crown and take you away from that no-good bunch, but then we figured the odds would be against us."

"I wasn't kept prisoner," Sam told them. "And I wasn't bushed by Crown riders. Two of Wyler's tough hands got me."

Rigby swore, and Mateo said uneasily, "We going to ride over to Wyler's place again, boss?"

Sam shook his head. "I'll go after Wyler, alone, when I'm able. Right now, I couldn't lift a sixgun. I'm a sick hombre, amigos."

He was right in that. Sam Hannegan was sicker than he realized.

SAM kept to his cabin, but he was determined not to take to his bunk. He told himself that night, when he went to bed at his usual time, that in the morning he would ride to Chris Bailey's ranch and have a talk with him. He knew that when he told Bailey that Wyler's hardcases had ambushed him, and revealed what Cash Hooker had told him, a wedge would be driven between Matt Wyler and the little ranchers. Sam hoped that would off-set his report on the damage-claim business.

But when morning came, he was too weak to ride. His wound wasn't healing properly. By sundown, he was burning up with fever. The next day, he didn't leave his bunk. Mateo and Jeb Rigby became worried, and finally hitched up the spring wagon. They made a bed of straw in the wagon, covered it with a blanket, then carried their boss from the cabin. He was delirious by then, and did not know they were taking him to town so that Doc Hadley could give him treatment.

Once in Estacada, Mateo and Rigby talked to little Pat Hannegan as well as Doc Hadley. It was decided that the sick man be placed in one of the Shamrock's upstairs rooms. Doc Hadley stayed with him through most of a night, until Sam's fever broke, and after that, for nearly a week, Cameo Marvin was Sam's nurse.

Time stood still for Sam Hannegan. He was told nothing about what was going on. The only people he saw were Doc Hadley and Cameo and his father. And he didn't care about what might be happening. Sam was that sick.

He was a little ashamed too, as he grew stronger, of the way he had treated Cameo in the past. He kept thinking about her, and hated to have her wait on him hand and foot. But Cameo smiled and would have it no other way. "Somebody's got to look after you," she said, when he protested.

He couldn't think of Cameo as an angel, for she was too worldly wise for that. But Sam saw her now as a desirable woman, and he knew at last that she was the girl he wanted to share his life. He began to wonder how he could tell her.

It was seven days before he was out of bed, and ten before he could leave his room and venture down to the barroom. It was another before he went out onto the street to feel the warmth of the April sun. And he found Estacada somehow changed.

There were few people about. None of the ranch wagons were in for supplies. Storekeepers lounged in their doorways. The saloons had no customers except a few townsmen. The people Sam saw gave him only a nod or a short greeting. The whole town seemed uneasy, as though waiting for something disagreeable.

Sam returned to the Shamrock and asked Cameo what was up. The girl said worriedly, "It's nothing that should concern you, Sam."

"Come on, Cameo," he retorted. "Let's have it."

Cameo sighed, and said, "All right, Sam. If I don't tell you, somebody else will. The feud flared up again three days ago. A Crown cowboy and Chris Bailey got into an argument here in town. Bailey came to see you, but Pat and I turned him away. I guess Bailey was mad about that. At any rate, he jumped the Crown cowpoke—Ed Macklin—and wanted to know if Jeff King was going to pay up on that damage claim. They got around to cussing each other, and Bailey hit Macklin. Macklin shot Chris Bailey."

"He killed Bailey?"

"No. Bailey's still alive," Cameo said. "He's laid up in the hotel, with Doc Hadley tending him. The marshal locked Ed Macklin up. If Bailey dies, Macklin will be charged with murder."

"Go on, Cameo!"

"Well, the Crown crew sent word that if Ed Macklin's not turned loose by Saturday, they'll come in and get him," Cameo went on. "And Bailey's friends threaten to hang Macklin if Bailey dies. . . . Neither outfit has shown up in town since the shooting. Estacada's just waiting for one big showdown. It'll come Saturday, sure."

Sam let out a groan. "I figured something like this would happen," he said, thinking aloud. "There'll be no reasoning with either side now. Dammit, if only Tom would get back!"

"What could he do?" Cameo wanted to know.

"Maybe nothing," Sam had to admit.

CHAPTER FOUR

Showdown

IT WAS three days until Saturday. They passed without developments. Ed Macklin was still in the lock-up, and Chris Bailey's life still hung by a slender thread. Business in Estacada was hard hit. The only riders that came in were drifters. Nobody came in from Crown Ranch or from the smaller ranches. Sam knew what would happen. With Saturday the deadline, both factions would ride in with their forces gathered together. Jeff King wouldn't be able to keep his crew in check. And Matt Wyler would be organizing the other side. Sam felt helpless.

By Saturday morning, he felt better physically. He was more like his old self again. But he was uneasy, frightened, in his mind. By noon, Estacada was still in the doldrums. No riders had appeared. Doc Hadley reported that Chris Bailey still lived, and he had hopes that the man would pull through. But Sam knew that the Crown crew would come to free Ed Macklin, and that Wyler's duped ranchers would

show up in time to stop it with sixguns.

Shortly after noon, the stage rolled in from the south and Tom Hannegan climbed from it. With him was a dour-faced man wearing the badge of the Texas Rangers. Tom and his companion came directly to the Shamrock, and he was smiling.

"I've done it, Sam!" he exclaimed. "I saw the Governor and he said it was a sensible thing. He signed a proclamation on April the seventeenth, making it unlawful for any civilian to wear sixguns or other firearms!" He introduced the Ranger, Bart Hanlon. "Hanlon is here to post printed notices of the proclamation and to see that it's obeyed in Estacada."

Sam shook hands with Hanlon, and said, "You gents are none too soon. There'll be hell to pay in this town before sundown." He told them of the showdown that was sure to come. "It'll take more than one Ranger to handle it."

Hanlon said, "I've got authority to deputize two men to help me. I'll swear in you two, and give you Ranger badges. That way I'll have one deputy representing each faction. Right now, though, I'm going to post the proclamation around town."

Hanlon posted his notices conspicuously, tacking them on the fronts of buildings from one end of Liberty Street to the other. Townsmen appeared to read the proclamation, and the few who packed guns quickly went home or back to their business places to tuck their weapons out of sight. A law was a law, especially when there was a Texas Ranger present to enforce it.

At the Shamrock, Hanlon deputized Tom and Sam Hannegan and pinned badges on them. Cameo Marvin was watching, along with old Pat Hannegan and the rest of the Shamrock's staff, and she eyed Sam worriedly.

"You can't make it stick," she told him. "Sam, this will be the end of you. Can't you see that?"

"Cameo, I'll be around to dance at your wedding," Sam said, grinning. Then, seeing the hurt in her eyes, he sobered. "I mean it, Cameo. I want you to marry me. I've been a blind fool not to see that you and I are meant for each other. After this is settled—"

"I wouldn't marry you, Sam Hannegan, if you were the last man on this earth," Cameo said furiously. "Do you think I have no pride?"

Sam stared at her in bewilderment, realizing that there was no understanding a woman. Ever since she had come to Estacada, Cameo had let him believe that he could have her for the asking. Now she was in a temper. It was easy to believe that she hated him.

He tried to find words, to ask her what he'd done to anger her. But then Tom Hannegan called from the swing doors. "Here comes the Crown outfit—the whole blamed crew, ready for war!"

The Crown riders were milling about Barker's livery when Sam headed downstreet with Tom and the Ranger. They had already seen the proclamation tacked to the front of Barker's barn, and one was reading it aloud for the benefit of those who couldn't read. The reader was Mort Barnes, and he finished laboring through the notice as Sam and his companions walked up.

"That's the law, friends," Ranger Hanlon stated. "All put down in plain talk so everybody can understand it."

Mort Barnes growled, "You mean to say we've got to give up our guns?" He didn't wait for a reply. "Like hell! We've got a chore to do, and we're holding onto our sixguns!"

"I know all about that," the Ranger shot back. "But it won't go. Ed Macklin stays locked up, and he'll stand trial—a fair trial."

"Fair trial, nothing!" Tip Abbott yelled. "Matt Wyler's gathering a bunch of no-good sons out on Broken Wheel Creek. They aim to come in and lynch Ed. You'll need a whole company of Rangers to disarm us!"

Sam knew Mort and Tip spoke for the whole Crown crew. There were more than forty grudge-bearing riders here, and they weren't the sort to back down even when the odds were against them. A Ranger and two deputies couldn't handle them. Suddenly Sam saw there was a faint hope. Jeff King was just riding in by horse and buggy. The owner of Crown Ranch reined in his horse, climbed from the buggy, and, in the sudden hush, walked over and read the proclamation.

He nodded to Tom Hannegan, said, "A good thing." Then, knowing his crew, he

faced them. "I've a deep-rooted respect for the law," he said, for all to hear. "And this is a sensible law. You have five minutes to turn your guns over to this Ranger."

King took out his watch, glanced at it, let it remain in his hand. "All those who are still armed at the end of five minutes," he added, "will consider themselves no longer in my employ."

THERE was a lot of grumbling, some curses, but the Crown hands knew their boss. Before the five minutes were up, sixguns were being dropped in the gunnysacks Hanlon got from inside the livery barn. When the last rider was disarmed, Sam Hannegan told the sullen crowd, "The town's yours, amigos—the same as any Saturday. Don't worry about Wyler's crowd. We'll disarm every man who rides into Estacada, and we'll protect Ed Macklin from any mob."

Jeff King got them up-street by offering to set up the drinks. Sam and Hanlon carried the two gunnysacks inside the barn and had Si Barker lock them in a cupboard. Afterwards, the three badge-toters went back to the center of town. Sam stepped into Langley & Doan's store; when he came out, he was shoving cartridges into a brand new Winchester. Bart Hanlon eyed the rifle, asked, "You expecting trouble with this other outfit?"

"I figure Matt Wyler and his hardcased hands won't give up their guns without a fight," Sam replied. "And I like a rifle handy when the shooting starts."

The Ranger said, "In that case, maybe I'd better get me a shotgun," and he too visited the general store.

Some of the Crown riders came out and lounged on the Shamrock's awninged porch. They had a sullen look. Almost every doorway and window along the main street was filled with curious townspeople. But except for the Ranger and his two deputies, the street was empty. Russ Malone, the dour-faced town marshal, lounged in the doorway of his adobe office and lockup. He gestured for Sam to come over.

"You're sure taking chances, Hannegan," Malone growled. "If Wyler's crowd comes to lynch Ed Macklin, we won't be able to stop it."

"Don't worry so much, Russ," Sam said. "Just sit tight."

"You should have kept the Crown crew armed until you made sure of the others," Malone went on. "You're crowding your luck."

"We'll soon see," Sam told him, for now he saw riders coming toward Estacada from the north.

Matt Wyler had gathered together more than sixty riders. Fixe of them were his own tough hands, men who had traveled the outlaw trails with him before he'd set up as a Panhandle rancher. The others were men who, had they not been misled, would have been peaceful enough. Ranch-owners like John Burton, who rode beside Wyler, and their hired hands. The bunch came on in a ragged column, halting by the hide warehouse at the north end of town. They had seen one of the notices.

Sam said, "Let's get it over with," and led Tom and the Ranger forward. They walked along the middle of the street, then, close to the hide warehouse, Sam said, "Wait here and keep me covered. I'll talk to them."

The riders were milling about, some of them dismounting and crowding around Matt Wyler and John Burton who were reading the proclamation. A freight wagon stood idle before the warehouse, and Sam climber upon it.

"That's it, friends," he said loudly. "On April 17, 1884, it became unlawful for a man to wear a pistol." He had the attention of the entire band. "The Governor sent a Ranger to enforce the law, and he deputized my brother and me to help him."

A rider swore, others muttered angrily. Matt Wyler looked up at Sam with a shocked look on his brutish face.

"There'll be no showdown fight with Crown," Sam went on. "Every Crown rider has been disarmed. Ed Macklin will stay in jail until he has a trial. Chris Bailey is expected to live—and so long as he's alive Ed Macklin can't be charged with murder!"

Wyler said savagely, "To hell with your law, Hannegan! We came here to settle things with Crown—and no trumped-up law will stop us!"

Sam ignored him. "I'm talking to you, Burton," he said. "You're the leader of all but Wyler's bunch. You've been baited by Wyler, Burton, you and all the rest of the little ranchers. Wyler's been leading you on,

so both you and Crown will go down, then he'll take over and set himself up as the biggest rancher in the Panhandle."

Burton was silent, but Wyler growled, "He's lying, Burton. He's sold out to Crown, just like I said from the start. Even after some of King's men bushwhacked him, he's willing to play Crown's game. And Crown is out to ruin us little ranchers!"

"Who said Crown hands ambushed me?" Sam shot back. "I never said it. You were the man to spread that talk, Wyler. And you know the truth. Your men, Pete and Charlie, jumped me that Sunday night. You wanted me dead for a couple of reasons. You hated my guts for having fist-whipped you, and you wanted a murder you could blame on Crown Ranch. And maybe too, Wyler, you didn't want that damage-claim handed to Jeff King. Maybe you were afraid he'd make good on it!"

Wyler was too taken aback to answer, and Jeff King's voice broke in, "Friends, I've decided to do my part to end this trouble. We'll make some settlement on that damage claim—providing there's no gun play."

The big boss of Crown Ranch had come alone and unarmed from the Shamrock, and he stood there facing his enemies not knowing whether he'd lose his life to blazing guns or if his offer would bring peace to the Panhandle. Sam Hannegan had to admire him.

John Burton and most of his men looked uncertain. Matt Wyler gigged his horse over to where his five hardcases sat their mounts.

Sam called out, "Ride by in single file, amigos, and drop your sixguns into this wagon. The law's here, and it'll be enforced. You first, Burton!"

John Burton hesitated a moment, then he rode forward and dropped his sixgun into the freight wagon. One by one, the others followed his example. Finally, only Matt Wyler and his five toughs were left. Wyler's face was black with rage. His scheme to take over the Panhandle had burst like a soap bubble, and he could see that, in Texas at least, his kind was done forever. The reign of the sixgun was over after nearly forty years. . . . Wyler looked one way another—at his men, at Sam Hannegan, at Tom and the Ranger—and counted his chances. He could see that the odds were two to one in his favor.

He said finally, "All right, Hannegan—you win." He rode forward as though to deposit his sixgun in the wagon. He drew the weapon and leaned from the saddle, then suddenly yelled, "Now, boys!"

Wyler's first shot was aimed at Sam Hannegan, but it went wild. Sam had jumped backward as he guessed the man's intent; he saved himself, but he hit the side of the wagon and lost his balance. He went over and down, on the wagon's off side, landing in a jarring heap. Wyler evidently thought he'd hit him, for the hardcase now turned his gun on the Ranger. Bedlam had broken loose. Horses were bucking and pitching, men were cursing and shooting. One man screamed in agony.

Sam picked himself up and ran around the wagon. He saw Tom Hannegan down, and the Ranger, though already hit, blazing away with his shotgun. Two of Wyler's men fell. Wyler and the other three headed for Bart Hanlon, meaning to run him down. Sam was behind them; he yelled and brought their attention to him, just as the Ranger collapsed. The Winchester cracked, and Pete Larue got it in the chest. Matt Wyler got in front of the remaining two hands, and came on shooting.

The look on Wyler's face was that of a crazy man. He was wild with rage, and he cursed Sam Hannegan as he fired. Sam saw him like that, over the Winchester, then he fired. Wyler too was hit in the chest. The rifle slug tore him from the saddle, dropped him to the ground. But he wasn't done yet. He got to his knees and swung his sixgun up in one last try. Sam's rifle cracked again, and Wyler was thrown over backwards. He didn't get up again.

There was Charlie Wall, now. The other untouched rider was making a break for it, his gun thrown away and his face a mask of fear. Charlie Wall reined his horse in, for steadier shooting. Sam was slow in throwing down on him, but Bart Hanlon's shotgun roared again before Wall could shoot. The scatter-blast knocked Charlie Wall from his horse. A sudden quiet closed down. It lasted only a minute, for now people came running from every direction. Among them was young Doc Hadley with his black bag.

Doc Hadley was busy the rest of that

day. He had Tom Hannegan, Ranger Bart Hanlon, and two of Wyler's hands to doctor up. But the young medico was something of a miracle worker, and he pulled all four of them through—along with Chris Bailey who'd been laid up for so long.

* * *

With Matt Wyler, Pete Larue and Charlie Wall dead, the little Panhandle ranchers got together with old Jeff King and surprised themselves by discovering that he was an agreeable sort. And in the Shamrock, the cowpunchers of Crown Ranch drank with those of the other spreads. Late in the evening, a couple of arguments broke out but they were settled with fists. No sixguns barked that night in Estacada. Little old Pat Hannegan boasted, "Faith, and it's as peaceful as the Old Sod!" Knowing Irishmen, especially the Hannegan clan, Estacada didn't know how to take that statement.

Everything seemed settled for everybody but Sam Hannegan. He waited until Cameo Marvin left her faro table, then he made her come with him from the Shamrock and walk along Liberty Street.

"What's this pride you talked about?" he demanded.

"I'll have you know," Cameo said tartly, "no man, were he President of the U. S. can treat me the way you did. I wouldn't marry a man who's just grateful because I nursed him when he was flat on his back. That's the only reason why you asked me to marry you—because you're grateful."

"That's all you've got against me?"

"Isn't that enough?"

"No; that's nothing to interfere with us getting married."

Sam wanted to crush her in his arms.

"I said—" Cameo began, then fell silent. They had reached the edge of town, where they were entirely alone. And there was moonlight on the Panhandle plains. Sam took the girl in his arms. He knew what Cameo wanted to hear. He had to tell her he was in love with her. And he was. He knew that now. He was in love with Cameo Marvin.

Sam's Irish face was a mash of terrible confusion.

But Sam didn't know just how to say it. He had whipped Matt Wyler and ended a range war. He had figured out how to disarm Texas. Yet now he was tongue-tied. Tom could have done better. Old Pat Hannegan, sentimental Irisher that he was, would disown him for not knowing how to make love to a colleen. Sam drew a deep breath, and burst out, "Cameo, it's like this—"

He didn't need to say more. The girl was laughing. She understood him, all right, and she hadn't been as angry as she seemed.

THE END

PRINT IT WITH BUCKSHOT AN' LET 'EM ROLL!

by Walt Coburn

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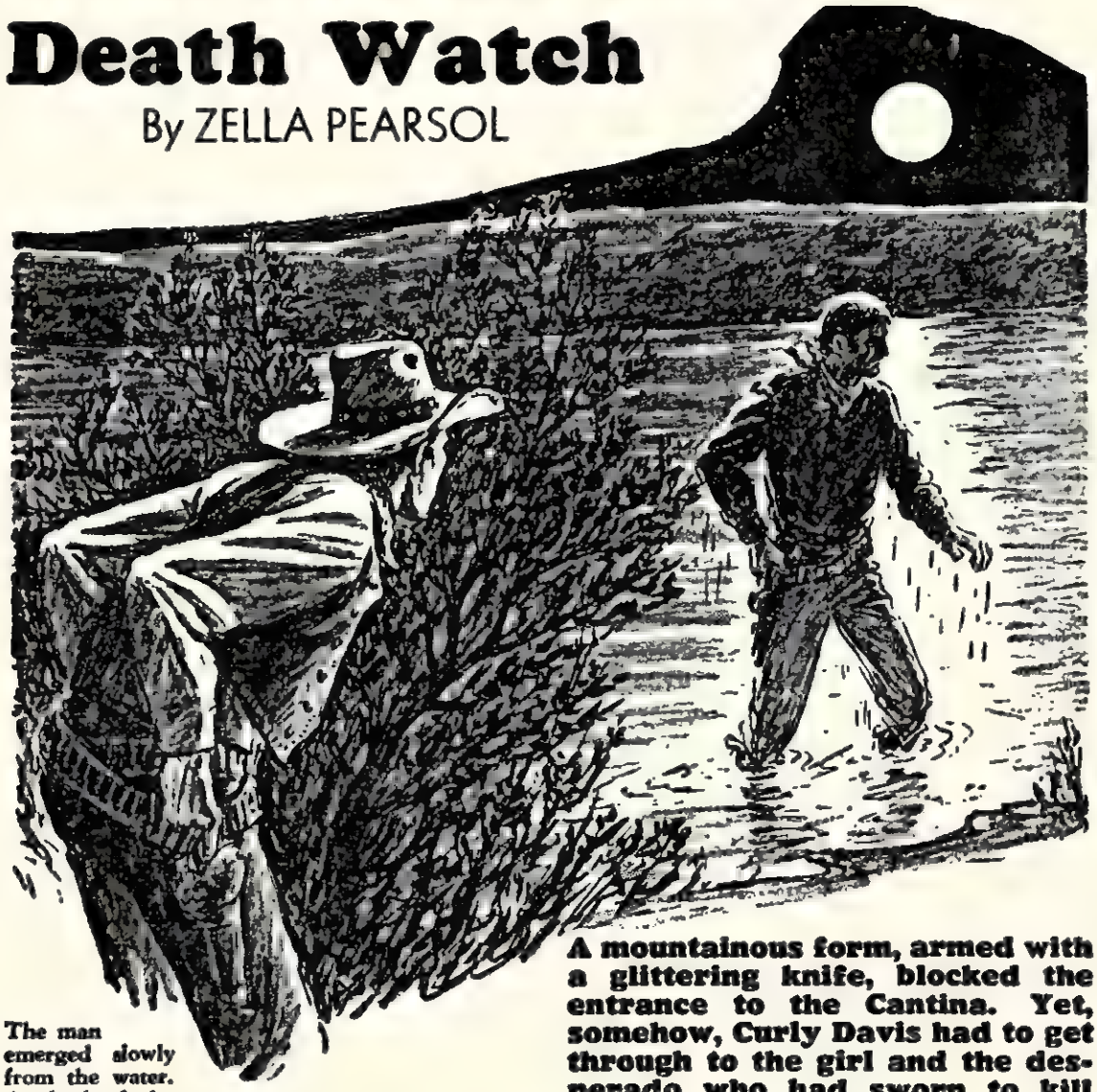
Ride the Border Death Watch

By ZELLA PEARSOL



A mountainous form, armed with a glittering knife, blocked the entrance to the Cantina. Yet, somehow, Curly Davis had to get through to the girl and the desperado who had sworn to kill her!

The man emerged slowly from the water. At the bank, he reached for his gun.

RIDING beside Roberto Allen, young Curly Davis drew his bronc to a halt as the two officers stepped into their path at the head of the bridge from Aveneda to Gredos. Curly's eyes were gray, expressionless, as he looked, at the two officers. Roberto Allen, dark lined face drawn into a smirk, snorted derisively.

"We stop," said Curly, "I suppose."

"Like any other suspected crook," Joe Vorton, the younger of the two officers said, cuttingly, "you stop."

The other officer, an older man, with a badge reading "U. S. Customs" on his shirt front, shook his grizzled head slightly at Vorton.

"Goin' an' comin'," he said softly to Curly. "Everybody stops here now. That's the new law."

Allen showed his yellow teeth as he smiled.

"Well," he said impatiently, "do we stop all day? We ain't got nothin'. Do you think we're a couple o' smugglers?"

Blue eyes flashing, Joe Vorton swore softly. "Smugglers!" he breathed. "Hell yes, I think you're smugglers! I *know* it. And that ain't all. I hope I get you away from the bridge sometime—when no one is around!" His eyes blazed afresh as he leaned forward. "And when I do," he went on softly, "there won't be any trial. Do you get what I mean, Allen?"

Between the slitted lids, Allen's eyes threw mockery at the officer. "Yeah," he said, "I get what you mean, Vorton." A bleak, wintry smile flitted for an instant over Curly's granite features. His eyes, still expressionless, gazed straight at the older officer, Hillis. Then his eyes looked up-river in the direction of Jard Island.

"A bet," he murmured to the officer, "I'd bet as much as two *pesos*, mister law-man, that you don't do no ketchin'. Not unless you rise and shine mighty early in the morning."

The kid turned his head to grin at Allen. Old Hillis waved his hand in a gesture of dismissal. Jingling their spurs, Curly and Allen urged their broncs out on the rickety bridge. Young Vorton, a jagged smile on his lips, hate in his eyes, watched them jog across the loose planks. Absently, he rubbed his hand against the gunbutt at his hip.

"Damn their souls," he gritted, tense voiced, "the stinkin' coyotes!"

Presently he threw a cigarette stub on the ground, stomped it with a high boot heel. "They killed Edison Jones. I know damn well they did. I wouldn't be surprised if that new kid, Curly, did it. He showed up here right after Edison was killed." His voice was rich with hate.

Smiling queerly, old Hillis watched the disappearing backs of Allen and young Curly. "At two," he said musingly, "At two, early in the morning, we make a catch up near Jard. An' Vorton, it wasn't *proved* that anybody in particular killed Edison."

Slowly, Vorton turned. Puzzlement in his eyes, he studied Hillis. "I don't *sabe* you, Hillis," he finally said. "You talk like you kinda favor this Curly fella, whoever he is. Mebbe he didn't kill Edison Jones, but he's trailing with a bunch o' skunks. And I hope he's in the batch we get at two in the morning!"

Old Hillis smiled again—whimsically. He looked from Vorton to where Allen and Curly had ridden off the bridge end.

"Old fire eater," he said to Vorton, "I gotta hunch he'll be right there."

"At two in the morning." Had Hillis repeated the words of the young kid, Curly? Vorton squinted thoughtfully at the grizzled officer.

"I sure hope so," he spat. The hate had not left his voice.

* * *

Gredos. Pablo's Cantina. Behind Roberto Allen, young Curly entered the doors of the saloon. In the early dusk, the lamps in the smoke-filled room threw a golden haze about the place. Straight to the bar, through a maze of tables, Allen and Curly Davis stalked, stiff-legged.

Slapping yellow dust from his shirt front, slipping his wide brimmed sombrero back on his head, Curly stopped beside the dark man.

To the fat, greasy faced, Mexican barkeep, Allen said, "Whiskey."

Curly nodded, eyes straying about the room.

About ten girls mixed with the crowd of men in the place. All of them—all but one—had too much paint on their faces, and wore flaring, sleeveless dresses. This other girl watched the broad back Allen presented to the room. Curly caught her gaze. And she let her lids slide down over her eyes. The lines about her straight lipped mouth deepening, she started a careless saunter toward the bar.

A Chinaman, one of a group, said something to the girl as she passed their table. Stopping, she turned her head, looked levelly at the four. The Mexican shook his head at the Chinaman.

"Allen's girl," he whispered to them.

They dropped their eyes to the table top. The girl smiled and came on toward the bar. Stopping behind Curly, she placed one hand on Allen's shoulder.

"Back?" she asked, smiling at Curly.

Allen turned his head, grinned at her. She nodded. But the hardness back in her eyes didn't disappear. Curly frowned at her back as she walked beside Allen to a door marked "Private," and entered with him.

"She's good," he muttered to himself, hand going into his vest pocket for makin's, "But she hates somebody. Me? Or Allen?"

The fat barkeep leaned over the bar. "What you say?" he asked.

Lips turning down coldly, Curly smiled. "It looks like rain," he said mockingly.

CURLY'S fingers fumbled with something in his vest pocket. He started to withdraw it, stopped. He looked carelessly about the room, then started toward the door. His fingers still stayed in his vest pocket.

With his left hand, he pushed open the door and stepped outside. It was nearly dark. Curly glanced up and down the street. Except for a man who came toward him, the street was empty. Watching this fellow, Curly waited, hand still in his vest pocket.

The man came closer. Near Curly he stopped, peered squintingly through the dusk at Curly.

" 'Lo Higgs," said Curly.

Higgs spat, cursed. "Yuh damn double-crossin'—" he began.

His hand streaked backward. Then Curly jerked. His hand flashed down—up! His gun flamed. Higgs stumbled forward muttering incoherently. Stepping aside, Curly watched his fall, waited till the twitchings of Higg's legs had ceased.

Then Curly sheathed his gun. Glancing quickly up and down the deserted side street, he ducked into the shadows between two buildings. Running through the darkness, he came to another dusty thoroughfare. Near an open window he halted, pulled a balled scrap of paper from his vest pocket.

In the yellow light, it read:

Roberto Allen killed Edison Jones.

Curly cursed. Who had placed that note in his pocket? The girl? Did she know?

Curly strode again toward Pablo's Cantina. At the door he paused, eased his guns in their holsters. Had anyone seen Curly kill Higgs, Pablo's man?

Eyes cold and watchful, hands easy at his sides, Curly pushed on the Cantina door with his boot.

* * *

Inside the "Private" room at Pablo's, the girl who had entered with Allen, stopped just beyond the door. With the nearest suspicion of a cold smile on her lips, she watched Allen's back as he took off his vest and threw it in a chair. The hard light flamed in her eyes as he unbuckled his gun belt and hung it over a nail in the wall. Her eyes stayed on the gun as Allen turned to look at her.

"Today's the day," Allen said, impatience in his voice. "What's the verdict, sister?" His black eyes roved the girl's trim length, form her dark brown hair to her silken clad ankles.

The girl took her eyes from Allen's gun. Her smile as she looked at the tall man, was a bit whimsical. "All right, Allen," she said, low voiced, "I'll play. But I'll play *my* way."

Allen raised his bushy, black eyebrows. "Yeah?" he asked. There was a lot of sarcasm in his voice—a lot for one word to carry.

She nodded. "Yeah, Allen, I'll play this way." She took a step forward, both hands outflung. There was appeal in her eyes. And, as she went on, her voice sank. "You get a load. You sell it. But *you* keep the money. Keep it for you—for me. Then I'll play, Allen. I'll go somewhere else with you. Somewhere where *you* can be the big boss. We'll buy a ranch, a business, or something, away from here. I'll play that way. But I'll never be your woman here!"

Rubbing his hands together in front of him, Allen smiled cruelly. He turned, paced back and forth across the room, glancing speculatively at the girl. Then he stopped. His eyes cleared. He smiled meaningly.

"Y' know," he whispered softly, leaning toward the girl, "I got riled when yuh first said that. But—but now, it ain't so bad." His voice sank even lower. He stepped forward, fire in the black of his eyes, he leaned forward. "Tonight," he whispered suddenly, "I'll get a load. I'll sell it, an' to hell with Pablo. We'll leave—"

The knob in the door at the back of the room rattled. Allen paled, sucked in his breath sharply. The doorknob rattled again. And Allen glanced apprehensively at his gun hanging on the wall as he stepped to the door and opened it.

A mountainous Mexican stepped into the room. Through puffy lids, his beady black eyes peered at Allen.

"Allen," he said in excellent English. "Come in here. I want to talk to you." His huge jowls quivered as he talked.

Allen nodded, glanced again at his gun hanging on the wall, then followed the big

Mexican through the door, and closed it.

"All right, Pablo," he said, respect in his tone.

Pablo smiled queerly, wrinkling the fat in his round face into greasy lines.

Without a word, Pablo turned and opened another door. It led to a small room in which there was a table. Standing in the doorway he motioned to Allen.

Allen stepped to his side, gasped and shoved his way into the room. On the table lay a dead man. It was Higgs, the man Curly had killed in the street.

Pablo smiled again at the question in Allen's eyes. "He talked before he died, Allen," he said. "He told me things that prove you're a fool. He told me things that prove we're all fools."

ALLEN'S face paled as he watched the big man pace back and forth. And his right hand rubbed against his holsterless right leg.

Pablo shook his big head angrily, "You," he said suddenly. "You're the biggest fool of the lot!" He raised his huge paw and waved it toward the door leading to the room where Allen had left the girl. "Know who she is? Edison Jones' sister! Edison, the Customs man you killed. And you're sweet on his sister!"

Allen cursed softly. Pablo smiled again.

"And the kid, Curly," he went on, "Curly Davis. He killed Higgs. Higgs had something on him too. I don't know what. Higgs died before he could tell all of it. But Curly is up to something. He's got to go. The girl's got to go."

Pablo stopped and shrugged one huge shoulder. Muttering under his breath, Allen started toward the door. Pablo threw out a big arm, stayed him.

"I'll fix Curly," he said. "You fix the girl. Get her away from here, and do it now. And Allen—no mistakes."

"Hell, no," Allen replied, "no mistakes. I know how to fix *that* filly." There was a load of hate in his voice.

Allen went out the door, strode through the other room and entered the room where he had left the girl. Indecision flew into the girl's eyes as she watched him slap his gun belt about his waist again. He took the gun from its holster and opened the leading gate with his thumb. The bright brass of shells looked up at him from the cylinders. Allen sighed, seemed relieved.

"Honeybunch," he said looking up, "get into some ridin' togs, right pronto. I got a load to deliver. I'll sell it an' we'll go through with our little deal, right now."

Allen watched the girl hesitate, smiled at her back as she straightened her shoulders and strode from the room.

"Like hell," he muttered to himself as she went through the door.

At the front door of the Cantina, Curly stepped to one side and watched the "Private" door at the other side of the room. It was closed. Seating himself near the door he rolled a quirley slowly while his eyes inspected the rest of the room. Striking a match with his thumb nail, he lit the cigarette. The door marked "Private" swung open.

Exhaling slowly, Curly watched Allen and the girl step through the door and come across the room. The girl's riding boots, drawn over whipcoard breeches, had silver spurs jingling at the heels. Her eyes, looking straight ahead, were full of indecision as she strode past. Curly's eyes slitted. Allen's black eyes seemed to mock the girl's back.

Directly behind Allen and the girl, five men came through the door. They were Pablo's men. Cold eyed, the young kid watched them. With apparent carelessness they sauntered across the room. Two of them stopped at the door. One went to the middle of the bar. Another to the far end of the room. And the fifth across the hall directly opposite Curly.

Curly Davis puffed again on his cigarette while he felt the eyes of all five of Pablo's men on him. Rising to his feet, he looked at the door. The two men there stared at him expressionlessly. One was a Mexican. He grinned like a cat, his white teeth showing contrastingly against the swarthiness of his skin.

Curly's eyes went to the one at the bar. He too, stared at Curly. And the others—they too. They had him. With a careless flip Curly tossed his half smoked cigarette away. A dancehall girl started across the floor, stopped, took in all five of Pablo's men in one sweeping glance. Then turned her eyes directly on Curly, she almost ran from the room.

Curly's eyes narrowed.

PABLO, almost filling the aperture, stood in the office doorway. His teeth showed, too, as he smiled at Curly Davis.

Suddenly, like a mountain cat streaking into action, Curly moved. Twin streaks of light, his guns came out. They spat. Once, twice, three times. The three lights in the long hall crashed to bits. One, flaming like a falling comet, crashed to the floor. And the flames danced weirdly, showing the quivering figures of scurrying men in a halo of red, as shots crashed out through the room.

Women screamed. Like lances of red, the fire of guns licked out, then died. Men yelled hoarsely—jamming, crowding, stomping, trampling each other in a mad scramble. The room cleared.

Fighting in the press of the crowd, Curly Davis, a gun in each hand, fought toward the door. The thunderous voice of Pablo roared above the yells of the crowd, cursing in Spanish, instructing in English. The flames from the spilled lamp mounted higher, roared in the center of the room.

A cursing gunman sighted Curly, raised his gun. Curly's own flashed. And the gunman died, blood from his head spurting on a dancehall girl's shoulder. She screamed, and fought wildly toward the door.

A mountainous form blocked the path of Curly at the Cantina entrance. Pablo! His hand swept up, a glittering blade in it. It flashed down. Curly groaned with pain as his guns blazed again. Pablo, big face convulsed, fell forward against the press of the crowd. They carried him, dead, out into the street.

Outside, stopping, Curly wrenched at the knife blade in his shoulder. Free, he threw it from him. The flames from the interior of Pablo's Cantina lighted the street with a flickering reddish haze. Out of it, into the darkness of a sheltering building, Curly raced, ran between two buildings and to the strange calmness of another street. He pressed his hand to his shoulder.

At a stable in the rear of the Cantina, he leaped on the back of his already saddled bronc. The shots dimmed behind him. The red haze in the sky mounted higher. The shots ceased altogether. And Curly pounded his way to the edge of Gredos.

Why was Allen taking the girl out of Pablo's? For safety? Hardly. Curly sank spurs to his bronc. He left the town behind him, rode madly toward the river. A woman's scream sounded ahead of him, high pitched, piercing. Three shots crashed above the pound of Curly's bronc's hoofs. Cursing bitterly, Curly shoved in the hooks and raced on.

* * *

Out of the front doors of the Cantina, up the street and to a dark cove-like room at the rear of the Cantina, Allen led the girl. He knocked on a boarded door, and a panel slid open. A Chinaman answered, nodded wisely at Allen. Muttering in a singsong voice, he slid a flat package through the aperture. It was wrapped in gray, oil-proofed silk. And the girl's eyes hardened as she saw it.

Wordlessly, Roberto Allen, stuck the package under his black silk shirt. He motioned and he and the girl strode along a narrow, evil smelling street. Coming to the door of a stable, they mounted their broncs, and rode unhurriedly toward the silver ribbon separating Mexico from *Los Estados Unidos*.

Evilly, Roberto Allen smiled as he watched the trail ahead of them. The girl, straight backed, eyes brooding and uncertain, twisted her lips into a jagged smile as a light blinked momentarily on the U.S. shore opposite the spot where she and Allen rode.

In a low voice she asked Allen, "I'm going with you?"

Allen chuckled. Like discolored yellow ivory his teeth showed in the moonlight as he grinned.

"Yes," he said, mock concern in his deep voiced tones, "I reckon you'll be goin' over with me."

Sharply, the girl looked at him. She didn't say anything.

Faint but sharp, from the town behind them, came the sound of shots. Allen turned, looked back, then grinned as he watched the trail ahead again. The girl watched him, puzzlement in her eyes.

"Shots," she finally said. There was a bit of alarm in her voice.

Seemingly sarcastic, that deep throated sound came from Allen's lips again. "Uh-huh," he breathed, "A—a—friend of ours is takin' a little trip."

Involuntarily, the girl gasped. Then she looked blandly at Allen. "A trip?" she asked casually. "Who's taking a trip, Allen?

And where?" Her voice shook nervously.

The shots from town roared into a crescendo of sound. Then they died. A red haze lit the sky. Allen looked over his shoulder and cursed.

"Curly," he spat suddenly, "He's makin' a trip. A trip to hell. Where *you're* goin'—Miss Jones!"

The girl raised her hands to her throat. Her breath sounded shrilly in the silence as their broncs stopped. Allen took his gun from its holster. As though fascinated, the girl's eyes followed his movements.

"No," she gasped. "No, Allen, you're not—"

Allen cursed again. His gun swept up. Once—twice—three times he thumbed the heavy hammer. The girl screamed. Three booming shots roared in the stillness of the night. Whimpering, swaying, slipping limply from her saddle, the girl fell to the ground. Allen watched her coldly for a moment.

THEN he shoved viciously at his gun as he pushed it into the holster again. He dismounted, took off his vest and hat. He rolled the vest into a ball. With a string he tied the hat to the rolled up vest and lashed the whole thing to the pommel of his saddle. Then he mounted, urged his bronc into the muddy waters of the Rio Grande. Splashing, the horse quickly made its way to deep water. Allen eased off its back. He slapped the bronc on the rump and the animal swam toward the other shore. The hat tied to its saddle looked very much like a man swimming beside his mount.

Allen swimming silently, watched it. He grinned.

"All right, John Laws," he muttered, "capture *that.*"

The sound of furious hoofbeats came from the Mexican side. They stopped. Allen, deep in the sluggish water, listened, heard the hoofbeats start again, and fade in the distance.

Was that Curly—escaped from Pablo? Or was it Pablo's men?

Then Allen dived, swam silently, up toward the distant shore. Allen had the dope. He'd sell it. Keep the money. The girl—she didn't have such bad ideas at that. Allen grinned, while downriver his horse snorted, splashed, and presented a good target as it neared the shore.

Blood dripping from his wounded shoulder, Curly Davis urged his bronc forward to the end of the low, wooden bridge spanning the Rio Grande. Momentarily he hesitated at its end. Then he dug in spurs, pounded his way upward above the bridge. He splashed into the river, made his way midstream. Who had fired the shots he had heard? Allen? At the girl? Who was she? Again, Curly took the wadded paper from his pocket.

Roberto Allen killed Edison Jones.

Who was interested in wanting Curly Davis to think that?

Smiling, jaggedly, he let the paper loose from his hand, and while his bronc swam the few feet of deep water in the river, he watched it float away. His horse's feet touched ground again, splashed to the shore.

Silvery, rippling into a broken sheen of shining white, the moonlight played on the river surface. No sound broke the silence. Guns back in their holsters, the young kid, Curly, sank to the shelter of a tamarac bush and waited.

Out in the waters of the river, Roberto Allen, swimming silently, made his way shoreward. Slowly, cautiously, he inched toward the tamarac lined shore. His feet touched bottom. Silent, resting, he stood, watched the shore line. Nothing moved. The waters, sliding lazily, lapped Allen's chin. A bit of white, floating past his face, caught his eyes. His hand reached out, caught the paper. In the silver light Allen made out the black words on white paper:

Roberto Allen killed Edison Jones.

Allen cursed. Moving slowly through the water, his hatless head dripping, clothes soaked and clinging to his body, Allen made his way to the shore. While his beady eyes watched above and below, he took his gun from his holster. Like Curly, he shook it, extracted the spent and unfired shells alike. From a waterproof bag under his shirt he extracted five cartridges for his gun and loaded it.

He grinned again as he patted the bulge under his shirt. Dope. Dope worth plenty of money. And that note. Someone was above him on the river. Allen would go down.

Gun in hand, moving with body bend forward, eyes watching hawklike, he started

downriver. Then he stopped, his mouth dropped open. A gasp, mounting to a startled exclamation, came from his lips. His gun hand swept up. The heavy hammer came back. Cursing foully, fear in his voice, Allen squeezed the trigger!

* * *

Hiding in the tamarac, Curly jerked to attention as he heard a muttered exclamation from out on the river surface. Swiftly but silently, he eased his guns from their holsters. Silence again. Curly's eyes swept sluggish waters. It was unbroken. Then—

Below him a form broke the surface—A head that was motionless for a time. Then head and shoulders. The upper part of a man emerged from the water. At the river's edge the form stopped, took a gun from its holster. Curly eased forward, crept silently through the stiff-stemmed tamarac.

As he went forward, he watched the river edge. He muttered softly, cursed to himself as he lost sight of his man. Then he heard a startled gasp in front of him—a muttered exclamation. Curly leaped forward, a snarl on his heavy features, pointing his gun at the girl of the Cantina—the girl who had left in company with Allen, the girl Allen thought he'd killed back there.

CURLY moved like lightning. His guns jerked in his hands. Flame leaped out to scorch Allen and to knock the dark-faced, dripping smuggler forward.

Back of Curly, the bushes broke again. Hillis, gun in hand; Vorton, face filled with hate, eyed Allen on the ground while his gun trained on Curly. Hillis smiled at the girl.

"Well," he sighed, "he's got at last." There was relief in his tone.

"At last," said Curly.

"At last," echoed the girl.

"Miss Natalie Jones," Hillis said, gesturing toward the girl, and looking at Vorton and Curly. "Edison's sister."

"She helped," said Curly, "a lot, but I thought Allen had killed her."

He winced with the pain of his wounded shoulder as he thrust his hand into his pocket. Producing a badge, he pinned it on his wet shirt front. He smiled jaggedly down at Allen as he did it.

Vorton, puzzlement in his eyes, stared from the girl to Curly. The girl stepped to Curly's side.

"Allen tried to kill me," she said smiling, "but I put blanks in his gun when he went in to talk to Pablo. And after he shot me with the blanks, I swam my horse over and got Mister Hillis. She smiled at Curly. "And I suspected you were you," she went on softly. "Edison has described you. But even though I wasn't sure I put a note in your pocket telling you who killed Edison."

She placed a hand on Curly's arm. "Thank you," she started. Then—"Why—why you're wounded. Allen said you were taking a trip. He said—"

Curly grinned. "Uh-huh," he breathed. "But Allen didn't connect. An' he had real bullets in his gun this time. I saw him reload when he came outa the river. An' Pablo—he took a trip ahead of me. Him an' about four o' his gunslicks. An' Pablo's place is burned down. I don't think you'll be bothered from that quarter for a while."

Hillis, eyes twinkling, watched Vorton as Curly let the girl lead him toward the yellow light blinking in the Customs House, upriver.

"There," he said. "Allen's dead. Pablo's gone. His place is burned, an' his gun slicks blowed apart. An' that's the gent you called a yella skunk not later than this afternoon."

"The badge," Vorton muttered, puzzled as he watched Curly's back. "He's a Customs man. An' he went into Mexico. That ain't—"

"Mexico? Mexico?" Old Hillis snorted. "Who said anything about Mexico? That young fella is Curly Davis, a pal o' Edison Jones. When Edison got killed he came up here from El Paso on leave o' absence. Allen didn't know him so we—ah—well, this kid, Curly, just sits down here on good ol' U.S. soil and waits for a smuggler to come along. Pretty soon a gent waltzes past. He *happens* to be the gent that killed Curly's pal, an' he *happened* to have some dope on him. So the kid, Curly, just nabs him. That's th' way it happened. Leaves o' absence don't affect a gent's duty when he sees it."

Hillis spat on the ground. "Quite simple, Vorton," he finished. "But that's the way it all happened."

Jeff's powerful legs, uncoiling like a spring, hurled him forward. Rumar tried to whirl back, but Jeff's shoulder slammed him violently to the ground.

Out of the Frying Pan

By GUNNISON STEELE

IT WAS well after dark when Jeff and Sue Ordway, riding a wagon heavy-laden with supplies, reached Wolf Springs. Here on the desert edge where cool, sweet water gushed from the earth at the base of red sandstone cliffs, was the only good water between the town of Silverpeak and their homestead on Reelfoot Creek.

"We'll camp here tonight," said big, dark-haired Jeff Ordway, "and get an early start tomorrow. Ought to make Reelfoot before night. I hope you don't mind, honey."

Sue's slender young body was encased in shirt, denims and soft leather boots. A red scarf held her yellow hair in place. "Of course I don't mind—I'll love it!" She replied, "To lie on the warm earth and see

Jeff knew that the two strangers meant to kill them. He cursed himself for risking the life of his lovely, tenderfoot bride, who never knew that a measure of simple human faith might be as deadly as bandits' bullets.

the stars, to smell the pine and sage, to listen to the wind and. . . ."

"And the wolves?" he asked teasingly.

Many times, in the safety of their strong log cabin, he had seen her shiver and grow pale as the gaunt gray beasts filled the night with their macabre music. He had pretended not to notice, just as he pretended not to notice other things.

She said, "Yes, and the wolves. Jeff, I—"

"Never mind," he laughed. He hung a lighted lantern on the wagon, spread a blanket on the ground. "You must be wore out after bouncin' all day. Take it easy on this blanket while I kindle a fire and get supper."

But Sue ignored the blanket. She helped him unload from the wagon the few things they'd need. She rummaged in the grub box while he kindled a fire. Six months ago she'd left Cheyenne, a "tenderfoot," to marry Jeff Ordway and live with him at the homestead on Reelfoot Creek. Here Jeff ran a few cattle in the lower hills, and in winter a trap line. It was a lonely, beautiful place, and at first Sue had hated and feared it. But, filled with aching love for Jeff and hope for their future, she'd tried valiantly to hide her misgivings.

She'd felt out of place among the sturdy frontier women, what few there were. But she'd worked hard, stilling her fears, eager to hold Jeff's approval.

"Honey," he'd said once, "if you left me the sun wouldn't ever shine again, the wind would stop blowin', and the trees would just naturally wilt and die!"

Despite this, she'd sometimes suspected that Jeff was ashamed of her greenness and timidity.

SUE said suddenly, "Jeff, somebody's coming—"

Jeff had been rummaging in the wagon, and now he turned quickly. Then he grew very still.

The two men must have left their horses back in the underbrush and crept up to the fire afoot, for they appeared abruptly in the circle of light. One of them was dark, thick-bodied, with a scar writhing across one cheek, while the other was tall, red-haired, pale-eyed. Their clothes were torn and dirty and stubbly beards covered their faces. They had guns in their hands.

The dark man said flatly to Jeff, "Just take it easy, bucko, and maybe you won't get hurt!"

He stepped forward to take Jeff's holstered gun. His powerful body rigid, Jeff darted a glance at Sue. She was staring wide-eyed at him, her face pale. He recognized these two, and knew that Sue did too. They were merciless killers. He knew that they would shoot him down in cold blood if he made a move. He allowed the dark-faced man to take his gun.

Only the day before he and Sue had read in the *Sentinel* an account of the bank robbery and killing of the cashier at Johnstown, fifty miles to the east, and had seen pictures of the bandits. The burly man was Sam Rumar, the red-haired one "Yuma Red" Kelly. Possemen supposedly had had Rumar and Kelly cornered in a rough section far to the east of here, but obviously they had slipped through the cordon.

Jeff crossed and stood beside Sue. He said thinly, "If this is a hold-up, you're out of luck. I spent the last cent I had for supplies—"

"Supplies," Rumar said, "is what we need most. We've got plenty money, but we've been jumpin' too fast the last three days and nights to stock up on grub."

"Take what you need, then, and ride on. No use scarin' my wife—"

"Not so fast!" Yuma Red was staring with his pale eyes at Sue. "The lady don't look too scared. Besides, we're powerful hungry. Here's grub, and here's a fire already blazin'. Ain't that right, Sam?"

The dark killer grunted, gestured with his gun muzzle.

"Set down over there, bucko, you and the girl both," he ordered. "And don't try any funny tricks. We've got lawdogs on our trail and we'd just as soon not leave anybody here to tell 'em where we go. Savvy?"

Jeff Ordway savvied well enough. He bitterly regretted not having made a fight of it while he had his gun. He knew now that Rumar and Yuma Red meant to kill them. But now he could only obey, watching for his chance. He took Sue's arm and pulled her to the earth beside him, where they sat with their backs against a wagon wheel. He could feel Sue trembling.

And small wonder, he thought. Since leaving Cheyenne she'd had to face many situations that were, to her, strange and

terrifying. But never anything like this. Now she was face to face with danger, possibly death, wicked and violent. No wonder she was pale and frightened and bewildered.

He found her hand and squeezed, and she squeezed back.

"I ought to be shot for gettin' you into this," he muttered.

Obviously Yuma Red was the work-horse of the two, for while Rumar sat on the ground back several feet from the fire, gun in hand, the lanky redhead started preparing a meal. But, even then, Yuma Red's pale eyes kept returning to Sue Ordway. In those queer eyes was an obscene flame that made Jeff furious, but Sue appeared not to notice.

As Yuma Red was about to dump strips of bacon into a skillet, to Jeff's amazement Sue got suddenly to her feet. With a lithe swing of her young body she went to the fire. She smiled at Yuma Red, and took the skillet from his hand.

"Let me do it," she said, her face flushed in the firelight. "A man shouldn't have to cook. You sit down, and I'll cook you the best meal a man ever tasted!"

Yuma Red grinned. Sue's hand, as she took the skillet, had touched the outlaw's. Now he suddenly seized her wrist.

Jeff reared to his feet, spat, "Turn her lose, you murderin' snake, or I'll tear yuh apart!"

Yuma Red released the girl, his head snapping around. Sue looked up at the killer, and laughed. Rage and bewilderment storming through him, Jeff Ordway started forward.

Rumar's gun snapped up.

"Set back down, bucko! And you, Red, let the girl alone—until after we've et, anyhow. If she wants to cook, let her!"

Jeff sat back down. He watched Sue, his puzzlement increasing. She didn't seem scared now. The firelight played over her tanned face as she held the sizzling skillet over the blaze. Occasionally she looked up and smiled at Yuma Red, who squatted on the ground a few feet from her. Obviously, Sue's intimate smile and actions were having a powerful effect on the tall gunslick.

JEFF fought savagely to hold back his anger and keep a clear head. Sue was from the city, a greenhorn. She didn't understand this new, rough land, its strict codes of behavior. Many times he had sensed her bewilderment, her resentment—and fear that she might leave him had been a dark weight pressing against his heart.

"No need to be afraid, girl," he heard Yuma Red say. "I'll see you ain't hurt—I'll take care of you."

Sue turned her golden head and smiled at the killer so close beside her. "I'm not afraid," she said.

The bacon had plenty of fat on it, and by now the skillet was bubbling brimful with hot grease. The strips of meat were becoming curled and crisp.

"It's about done," Sue said to Yuma Red. "Will you hold that plate while I fork it out?"

She lifted the skillet from the fire, turned toward Yuma Red—and with a quick twist of her wrist suddenly flung the skillet of scalding grease straight into the killer's face!

Bawling with pain and surprise, Yuma Red dropped the plate and tumbled over backwards, clawing with both hands at his eyes. The swirl of movement, Yuma Red's screams, jerked Sam Rumar's attention toward the fire. He cursed, half rose to his feet, his gun muzzle swiveling.

Jeff Ordway's powerful legs, uncoiling like a spring, hurled him forward like a catapult. Rumar tried to whirl back, but Jeff's shoulder smashed into his stomach, slamming him violently to the ground. The gun roared, but the bullet went wild. And Jeff drove at the burly killer again, mallet-like fist hammering.

Yuma Red, although totally blinded by the hot grease, had swayed to his knees and was fumbling at his gun. Sue Ordway leaped at him. She wielded the skillet with deadly effect, slamming it against Yuma Red's head until he wilted with a low moan down to the ground.

Rumar was sitting up dazedly, his face battered and bleeding. Jeff stood over him with a gun in his hand. Quickly they trussed the two beaten outlaws. Then they faced each other there in the firelight.

"You all right, Sue?" he asked anxiously.

Sue felt like crying, but she smiled and said, "Sure, Jeff, I'm fine. But I—I'm such a greenhorn, I'm afraid I ruined the bacon!"

Hair of the Gun-Dog

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

Honest Ike Krutch's patented Boon for Baldness boomeranged on that super-salesmen when, to demonstrate his never-fail hair-grower, he lifted off his derby hat—and his luxuriant toupe along with it!

NO ONE was able to figure out why Pistol Pete O'Tooligan decided to hang up his sixguns and open a barber shop in a down-grade cowtown like Longhorn City. He could have searched Texas over without finding a less likely place to practise his trade in, because there must have been something in the alkali dust and dry desert air that caused scalps to moult. You could have rounded up the leading male citizens of Longhorn and they couldn't have rustled up enough hair to stuff a pincushion.

It was this tally of bald heads that gave Longhorn its only excuse for disgracing itself in the eyes of the Lone Star State, by letting Colonel Krutch swindle them with his magic hair-restorer. And if it hadn't been for Pistol Pete O'Tooligan having his barber shop in Longhorn, it's likely the town would still be the laughing stock of the border.

It all started on the Saturday afternoon when old Baldy Munroe, the marshal, locked up his calaboose and went over to O'Tooligan's Tonsorial Parlors to get himself a haircut, something Munroe did three or four times a year whether he needed it or not.

The marshal climbed into the chair to get his turkey neck trimmed, bellering as usual at having to pay the full price of two bits when his dome was as hairless as a hot-water bag. And Pistol-Pete came back as usual with the same joke that barbers have been using ever since Delilah took her shears to Sampson, about how he ought to charge double on account of the time it took to locate any hair.

Marshal Munroe was just getting his mustache trimmed when a commotion sounded at the door. A flashy-dressed dude in a green derby and yellow-checkered coat was trying to kick his way through the assorted hound-dogs and other mongrels who always collected in front of the barber shop, in the hopes O'Tooligan's razor would slip and they could pick up the scraps.

The stranger managed to pry himself and his bulging carpetbag into the shop just as Pete was lathering the marshal's face.

"Have a chair, stranger," O'Tooligan invited, flashing his good-natured Irish grin. "You're next. These other galoots are just loafing, Mister."

The dude pushed his green derby back to expose the lushest crop of hair O'Tooligan had ever laid eyes on, long and black as a polecat's pelt. He sized up the four old codgers sitting on Pete's bench, and noticed that every last one of them was as bald as a bedpost and twice as shiny.

"Gentlemen, you will bless the day I walked through yonder kennel door," the stranger announced, opening his carpetbag and fishing out a bottle of something that looked like bluing. "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Colonel Ike Krutch, better known to my host of friends as Honest Ike."

Pistol Pete O'Tooligan looked around just long enough for his razor to slash clean through the strop he's been using for twenty years. That should have been taken as an evil omen, but Pete didn't even notice what he had done.

"What are you sellin'?" he asks, stropping the razor on thin air. "Whiskey or paint-remover?"

Colonel Krutch uncorked the blue bottle and turned to Pete with a pained expression on his face.

"I hold in my hand here," he said, "the most wonderful invention since whiskey was discovered to be good for something else besides curin' snake bite. A Boon for Baldness, the Salvation of Slick Scalps, the

They took after the hair-raising renegade, armed to the teeth. . . .

Hope of the Hairless. In short, gentlemen, you are gazing at Colonel Krutch's Magic Hair-Restorer, guaranteed to grow fuzz on a flapjack or your money back!"

The baldies on Pete's bench leaned forward like a row of gargoyles, lapping up the bait and begging for more.

"I'll buy a bottle!" blurts Marshal Munroe. "How much ye askin' for it?"

Colonel Krutch didn't appear to have heard the marshal.

"One application of this magic fluid," he went on, "and in less than twenty-four hours, your bald pates will sprout a bumper crop—yea verily, will grow as verdant a head of hair as you see on my own humble cranium, gentlemen."

With which Colonel Krutch whipped off his derby with a grand flourish, and in so doing peeled off a black wig which exposed a noggin as polished as the tin star on Munroe's vest.

"Jumpin' juniper!" croaked O'Tooligan, plastering the marshal in the eye with a brush full of lather.

Half blinded, the marshal jumped out of the barber chair and whipped out his old .45 Colt.

"A swindler, eh?" bellowed the marshal, adding a few indignant embellishments which were anything but righteous. "I wouldn't have tooken a bottle of that concoction if you'd offered me a gallon for nothin'. It'll be a cold day in July when you swindle anybody in Longhorn City, Colonel. We're too foxy."

"Yeah!" puts in Grandpa Poody, the bank janitor. "A citified snake in the grass trying to peddle fake medicine to the unsuspecting citizens of this community. What do you take us for—a bunch of jugheads?"

Honest Ike should have been flabbergasted by the revelation of his imposture, if

not by the gun Baldy Munroe had leveled at his brisket. But the Colonel's big brown eyes were as innocent as a new-born leppy's. He stuffed the wig in his pocket, flipped his derby onto a hatrack, and then he gently pushed Munroe's shooting iron to one side.

"Can't you gentlemen take a joke?" the Colonel giggled. "I am prepared to back my claims for this product with cold coin of the realm. Yea verily, I will restore hair to my own nude noggin to prove my point. Do I hear any takers?"

With which Colonel Krutch sloshed some of the blue stuff over his head and rubbed it in good. Then he corked the bottle and took out a turnip watch from his vest pocket.

"It is now three-thirty P.M.," he said. "Gentlemen, I will wager any odds you care to name that by eight o'clock tomorrow morning, I will be sporting a healthy head of hair. And I don't mean a toupee, gentlemen. A genuine hirsute harvest, yes-sirree!"

THAT took the wind out of the marshal's sails. He holstered his hogleg, blew his nose a couple of honks, and eyed the other baldies in the shop to see how they reacted. Besides Grandpa Poody there was Jeb Gilroy, who runs the Cowboys' Mercantile, and Cy Dixon the Overland Telegraph operator, and Del Grover, the bank cashier from across the street. Bald-heads all, and drooling with excitement. All four of them had their pokes out and were counting their change.

"Colonel Krutch, " said Marshal Baldy Munroe, "I was fixin' to clap you in jail on a vagrancy charge. But I'm a fair man. It's only right you should be given a chance to prove your claim. What odds are you quotin' that your hair tonic will show results before eight A.M. tomorrow mornin'?"

Honest Ike smirked like a cat licking cream off its whiskers.

"Well, now," he said modestly, "Like I told you, they call me Honest Ike. It really ain't fair for me to accept your bets at all, seeing as how I'm backing a sure thing. But because my reputation for integrity is at stake, I will give you odds of ten to one. With the stipulation that no single bet can exceed five bucks. It would not be sporting for me to take more of your hard-earned money out of Longhorn."

The grapevine had spread the news by now, thanks to the kids who hung out in front with their dogs, and inside of five minutes ten bets had been placed at a sawbuck each, and Colonel Krutch had covered the bets with five hundred dollars in greenbacks. He had a wad that would have choked a jenny mule, and every cowhand in town was begging to get his ante into the pot, but Krutch closed the kitty.

"Of course," Honest Ike remarked, "being a stranger in Longhorn City, I will expect the stakes to be kept overnight in a safe place. It being Saturday afternoon, I presume your local bank is closed for the week-end?"

Del Grover, the banker, spoke up quickly:

"I'll lock the dinero in my vault," he offered. "I run the Cattlemen's Bank across the street yonder. Tomorrow morning at eight o'clock sharp, if you have a head of hair you can prove is not a wig, the stakes are yours, Colonel."

Honest Ike allowed that this arrangement was reasonable. Putting on his derby so as to accompany Del Grover to the bank, he caught sight of Pistol Pete O'Tooligan waiting patiently for the marshal to climb back in the chair for his shave.

"As owner of the shop, and as a professional courtesy, I ought to cut you in on our little pool, my friend," Honest Ike smirked. "One dollar gets you ten—"

O'Tooligan shook his head.

"I never bet on another man's sure thing," Pistol Pete said. "Count me out, Colonel."

The peddler scratched his bald head and squinted hard at the barber.

"Ain't I seen you before some place?" he asked.

O'Tooligan looks up from oilstoning his razor.

"Maybe so, maybe not," he drawled. "Before I took up the barber trade I used to tour the country with a trick pistol-shooting act. Maybe you saw me on the stage—you having the look of a theatrical trouper yourself."

Colonel Krutch shook his head and picked up his carpetbag.

"The only stage I was ever on had four wheels and a team hitched to it," he wisecracked. "Well, gentlemen, shall we go

over to the bank and salt down our wagers?"

Everyone trooped out of the barbershop except O'Tooligan and the marshal. Baldy Munroe picked up the sample bottle which Colonel Krutch had left behind. He sloshed his bald dome with the blue mixture and it streamed down over his face and dripped off his handlebar mustache, blinding him.

Munroe groped for the barber's hand mirror on a shelf and opened his eyes. Then he let out a yell that could have been heard half way to the Panhandle.

"This dope works!" he bellowed. "I got hair all over my face!"

Pistol Pete O'Tooligan yanked the hairbrush out of Munroe's paw and gave him the hand mirror instead.

"I ain't in the mood for your comical cut-ups, Marshal," he complained. "You know, come to think of it, I believe I've seen that Honest Ike somewhere before, myself."

Baldy Munroe chuckled and wiped the blue off his cheeks.

"That's one fancy-pants peddler who'll leave some dinero in Longhorn City," he bragged. "It don't stand to reason that this blue stuff could raise hair, else the Colonel wouldn't be peddlin' it in no run-down trail town like Longhorn. He'd be a Noo Yawk millionaire if he was on the level."

Pistol Pete wiped his hands on his apron as he saw the marshal head out the door.

"Honest Ike," he muttered. "Beware a man who advertises his own virtue, Marshal."

Baldy Munroe assumed that Pistol Pete was quoting the Scriptures.

NEXT morning at seven forty-five there was a good-sized crowd waiting out in front of the Trail House Hotel, which was Longhorn's only hostelry boasting hot and cold bedbugs in every room at no extra charge.

It seemed that Colonel Krutch had bent an elbow with the boys in at the Silver Dime Saloon the night before, and had mentioned the fact that he was bunking overnight at the Trail House. When he left the barroom at midnight, there wasn't a sign of any fuzz sprouting through his scalp.

Colonel Krutch walked out the hotel door at the dot of eight, which was lucky for him, inasmuch, as it was the first time in history that Longhorn City had been out of bed by eight o'clock on a Sunday.

His green derby was clapped over his head and a big grin hung between his ears and his eyes sparkled like Santa Claus'. Everyone crowded around, waiting to see if the magic tonic had grown any hair on the Colonel during the night, all set to collect their winnings and celebrate.

"Good morning to you, gentlemen!" the peddler said cheerily. "It pains me to reveal that you have lost your bets, but to each loser I will give absolutely free one pine-sized bottle of my magic preparation."

So saying, Colonel Krutch whipped off his derby.

Lo and be gosh, if his head wasn't covered with a one-inch stubble of red bristles, as thick and stiff as a shoe brush.

"It's an abdominal hoax and a fraud!" yelled the marshal, hauling out his six-shooter again. "That's a wig, Colonel!"

Honest Ike bowed low like a Chinaman and said, "Feel, gentlemen! Feel!"

The boys rubbed their fingers over the wire-hair pompadour of Krutch's. It felt natural enough. Pistol Pete O'Tooligan, the die-hard skeptic, went so far as to take a pair of pliers from his levis pocket and jerked out a hand of red hair by the roots, leaving a little bloody spot on Krutch's cranium and making the peddler squeal like a scalded shoat.

But there wasn't any doubting it was bona fide hair after that drastic test. No wig bleeds at the roots. Even O'Tooligan had to admit that Krutch's bald dome was now covered with as pretty a crop of hair as any barber could ask for.

"This is incredible," Pistol Pete said in awed tones. "It's patently impossible and utterly fantastic. But unless we have all been hypnotized, I'm afraid you buckaroos have lost your bets."

There was a big commotion then, as the losing bettors crowded around to get their consolation prize in the form of a free bottle of hair restorer. The Colonel, to show he was a good sport, handed Jeb Gilroy a twenty-dollar bill and told him to set up the boys over at the Silver Dime bar.

Everyone made a beeline for the saloon, except Pistol Pete O'Tooligan, who went

back to his barber shop to shave himself.

Del Grover, the bank cashier, was the only man left with the Colonel, so the two of them headed for the Cattlemen's Bank to get the stake money. When they got to the bank they found Grandpa Poody, the janitor, busy swamping off the porch steps as he did every Sunday morning.

Grover unlocked the lobby and opened up the bank vault. He was inside unlocking the cash box when he looked around to see Honest Ike following him into the vault.

The peddler had a shot-loaded quirt in his fist, and the next thing Del Grover knew he didn't know a thing, having been knocked out colder than an Eskimo's ear by the quirt handle.

But Grandpa Poody, the janitor, caught sight of what was happening. He dropped his mop and bucket and galloped into the teller's cage to get the double-barreled shotgun he knew was cached under the counter.

Grandpa Poody didn't get a chance to use the scattergun. Colonel Krutch stepped out of the vault with a sixgun and shot Grandpa Poody between the eyes.

Honest Ike tarried long enough to scoop all the paper money and gold specie he could lay hands on into his carpetbag. Then he high-tailed it out of the bank and into the mesquite chaparral behind the building. Waiting for him was a big leggy steeldust gelding, all bridled and saddled and champing at the bit.

The sound of the gunshot brought Pistol Pete O'Tooligan racing over from the barber shop across the street. It was Pete who gave the alarm which emptied the Silver Dime Saloon. By that time, Colonel Krutch was just a patch of dust out across the prairie, heading the general direction of the Pecos.

Marshal Baldy Munroe rounded up a posse when he heard that murder and robbery had been committed, and took out after the hair-raising renegade, armed to the teeth. He found out later that he had neglected to bring along any shells for his guns, so it was probably lucky that they lost the killer's sign over in the brasada flats.

The posse came back to Longhorn City just before dark, empty handed. Everybody in town felt miserable, because poor old Grandpa Poody had been a well-liked hombre. Del Grover was wearing a bandage like a turban around his head, but was none the worse off for his pistol-whipping. He reported that Krutch had made off with around five thousand dollars in bank loot.

The marshal went over to Pistol Pete's Tonsorial Parlors, aiming to bawl out O'Tooligan for not riding out with the posse. He found the barber busy at his desk in the back room, with a big pile of sealed envelopes in front of him.

"You should 'a' been out on our manhunt instead of gettin' caught up on your correspondence this way," complained the star-toter. "After all, you're the champeen pistol-shot of Texas."

O'Tooligan explained what he had been doing all day Sunday then.

"I've written a description of the killer and the details of his swindle to every barber-shop supply house I know of," he explained. "The legitimate manufactures of hair tonics and suchlike will take an interest in dabbing their loop on this swindler."

Munroe still wasn't satisfied.

"What good will them letters do?" he wanted to know.

So Pistol Pete went on and explained that Colonel Krutch would sooner or later try to pull his hair-restorer swindle in some other cowtown, just like he had in Longhorn City. These barber supply dealers would print up batches of reward posters, most likely, and mail them to every barber shop between Nevada and the Chisholm Trail.

Sooner or later, Colonel Krutch would pull his swindle at some shop that was fore-warned what to expect . . .

"Well," the marshal said grudgingly, "it might pay off. But I still can't figger out why that hair restorer worked on the Colonel's noggin last night. Crook or not, nobody kin deny his stuff worked."

COWHANDS and stage drivers and muleskinners soon spread the news all over Texas about how the "bald-headed battalion" over in Longhorn City had swallowed a swindler's bait, hook, line, sinker and rowboat. It was a scandal of the first water, how Longhorn City got its bank robbed and one man killed, and nothing to show for it but a few quarts of bluing.

A couple of months passed by and the

bald-heads had finally stopped feeling sheepish over the affair, when one day Cy Dixon, the Overland Telegraph operator, came galloping out of his telegraph office waving a message he had just taken off the wires from Austin.

This telegram was addressed to Pistol Pete O'Tooligan, and was marked "Personal and Confidential."

"The Rangers dabbed their loop on Colonel Krutch when he was fixin' to rob a bank over in El Paso day before yesterday!" Dixon yelled, not waiting for O'Tooligan to read his own telegram. "The Rangers have got Colonel Krutch in jail pendin' trial for the murder of a bank teller in El Paso."

But that wasn't the half of it. It seemed that there were rewards posted for Honest Ike's capture all the way from California to the Cherokee Strip, and all of this dinero was due and payable to Pistol Pete O'Tooligan!

And it was no idle rumor, because a few days later the Wells-Fargo stage pulled in from San Antone with bounty money totalling five thousand dollars, paying to O'Tooligan for bringing about the capture of the notorious swindler and killer, Colonel Krutch.

O'Tooligan happened to be out of town, fishing for cats over in the Pecos, but when he got back to Longhorn City that night the first thing he did was to turn over the reward dinero to Del Grover, to deposit in the Cattlemen's Bank and make up for Colonel Krutch's unrecovered loot.

The second thing Pistol Pete did was to set up every body to prime whiskey at the Silver Dime. He was very modest about his part in helping the Texas Rangers capture Colonel Krutch.

"You see, those letters I sent to the barber supply houses resulted in every barber shop along the Border getting printed warning notices about this hair-restorer swindle of Krutch's," O'Tooligan explained. "It was only a question of time until some barber would spot that swindler and lay a trap for him. Which is exactly what happened over in El Paso. The Rangers give me too much credit, that's all."

Longhorn City figured that Pistol Pete O'Tooligan deserved all the credit there was, since he had saved the reputation of the town and covered the Cattlemen's Bank losses in the bargain. Everyone figured the matter was ended, but it turned out it wasn't.

After he had finished his own drink, Pistol Pete O'Tooligan slipped out of the saloon and went back across the street to his barber shop. On account of being gone all day fishing, he had to sweep out the place ready for tomorrow's business.

He hung his sombrero on a peg and put on his barber's apron and grabbed a broom and went to work. He was about finished when the barber shop door slammed open. There on the threshold stood Colonel Krutch, his eyes blazing like fireballs.

If the barber thought he was seeing a ghost, he didn't act like it. It was Colonel Krutch in the flesh, even though the papers had printed how he was locked up in the El Paso calaboose, waiting for the hangman. It was Colonel Krutch, wearing his black wig to hide his bald head, and he was toting a young cannon that was aimed straight at Pistol Pete's brisket.

"I reckon you know why I'm here, O'Tooligan," Krutch said, clicking his gun-hammer to full cock.

"Yeah," the barber sighed, leaning his broom against the wall. "I've sort of been expecting you to show up, Honest Ike."

Colonel Krutch crossed over to make sure that Pistol Pete wasn't packing any shooting irons under his apron, which he wasn't. Pete had hung up his guns the day he started earning his living with clippers and comb.

"I can't shoot you here, because that would bring the town on my heels," Krutch said. "I've got two horses waiting out in the brush behind your shop. We're taking a *pasear* out in the sage flats a few miles and I'm paying you off for sicking the Texas Rangers onto me over at 'Paso."

Pistol Pete shucks off his barber's apron.

"I'll go peaceable," he said. "Wait till I get my hat."

The Colonel kept his .45 pointed at O'Tooligan to make sure he didn't try any monkey business like crashing through the side window, but Pistol Pete just shuffled over to the corner where his John B. was hanging.

Up above the hatrack was a mirror, as in most barber shops, and O'Tooligan saw

(Continued on page 97)

Don't Lock Horns

CHAPTER ONE

Bad Trouble on the Puget

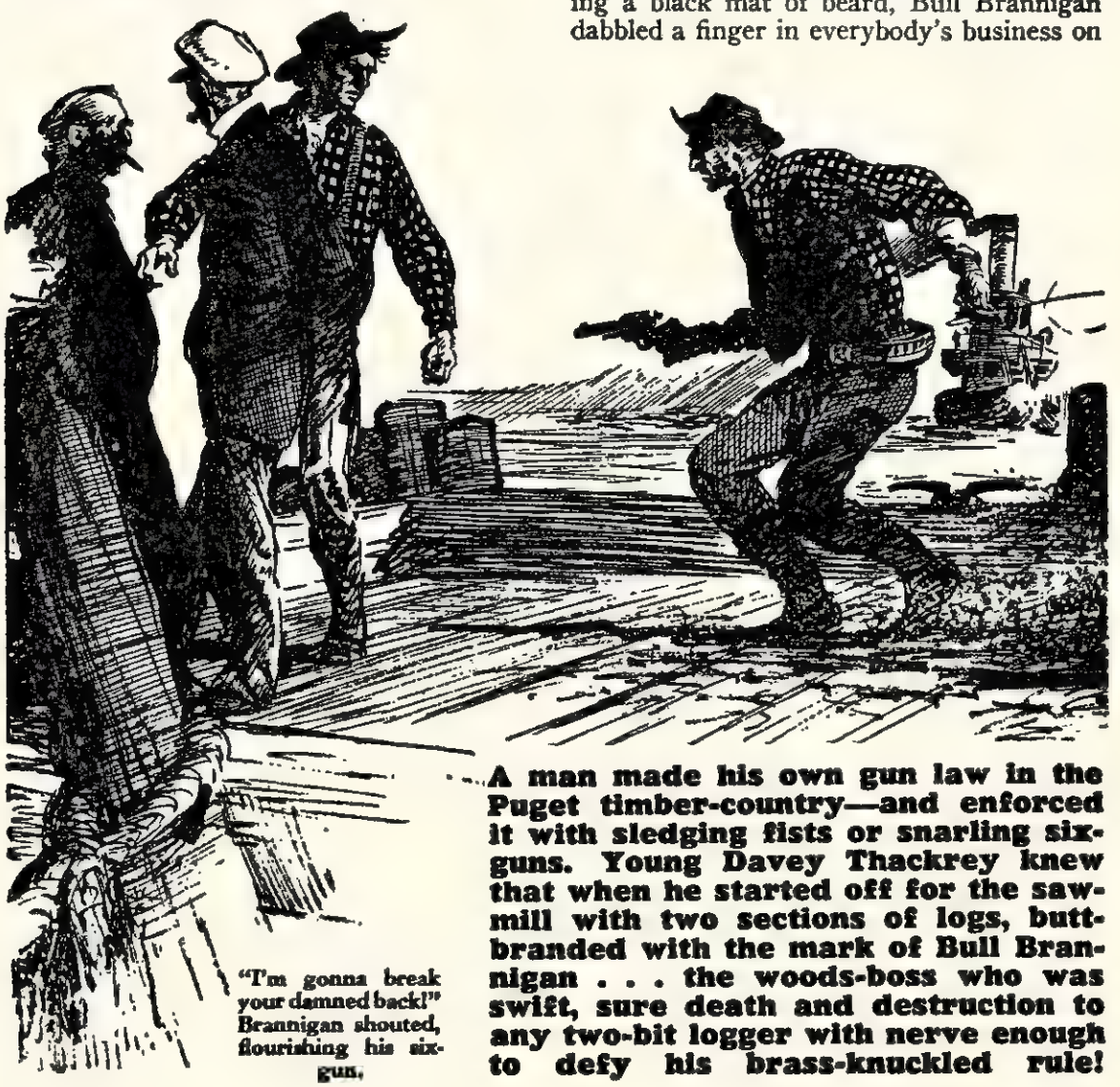
WHEN a man wants something bad enough, he's liable to be pretty stubborn about it. And young Davey Thackray wanted a cabin in the woods with frilly curtains at the windows, a big, soft rug on the floor and pretty, sloe-eyed, soft-voiced Martha Driscoll in the kitchen. His wanting was bone deep. Otherwise, he might have let Bull Brannigan's thinly veiled threats turn him aside.

Brannigan, tailed by his camp foreman, Curt Gunnerson, stopped Davey as he came out of the crossroads store, a gunnysack of grub over his shoulder. Curt Gunnerson was just a knot hard woods boss, but Brannigan was a man who often caused strangers to turn and look at him a second time.

"Hear tell you hand-loggin', Thackray," Brannigan said in his deep, booming voice.

Davey nodded curtly, moved to go on by. He didn't like this huge hulk of a man and wanted nothing to do with him.

Bull-necked and barrel-chested and sporting a black mat of beard, Bull Brannigan dabbled a finger in everybody's business on



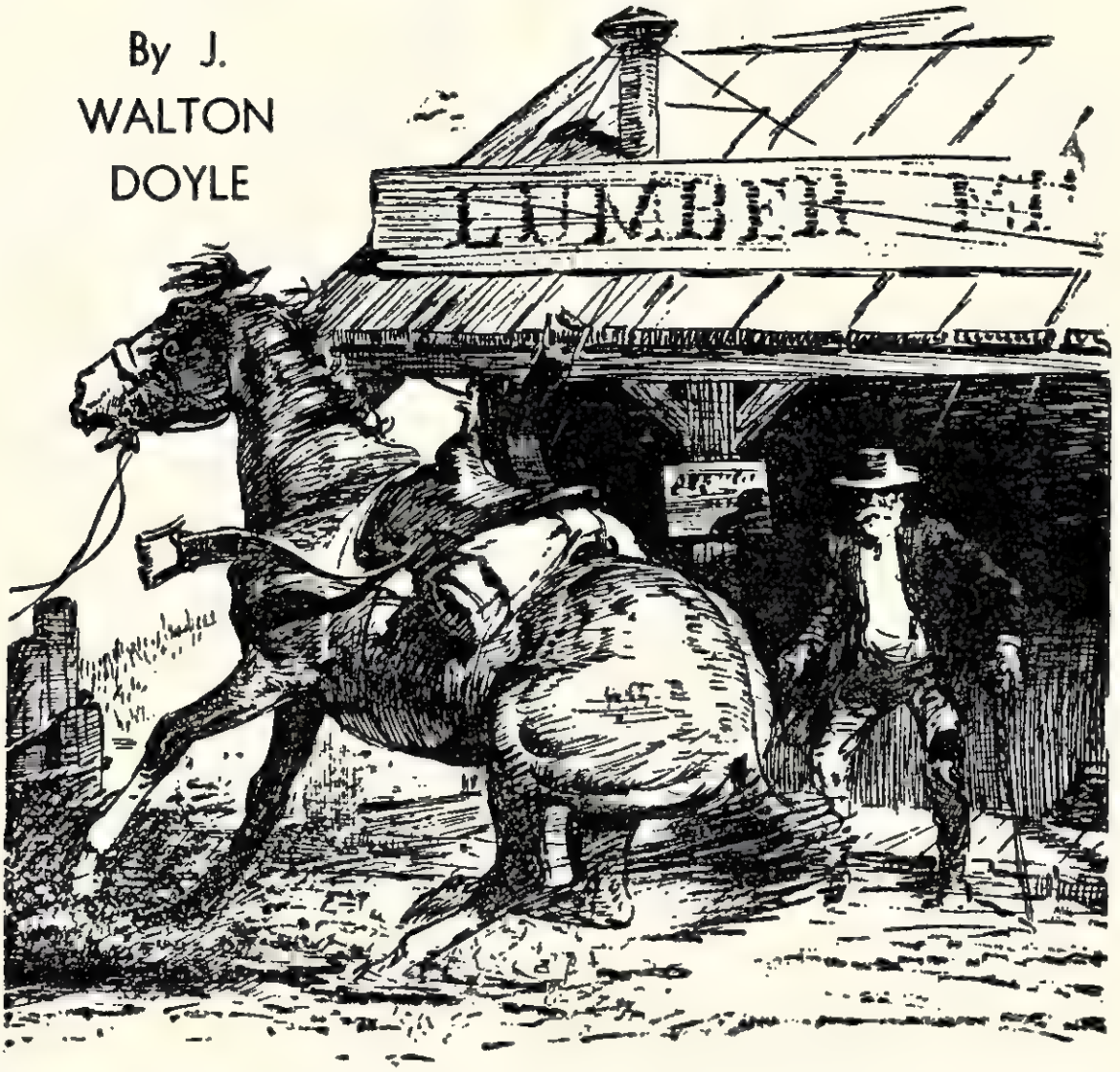
"I'm gonna break your damned back!" Brannigan shouted, flourishing his six-gun.

A man made his own gun law in the Puget timber-country—and enforced it with sledging fists or snarling six-guns. Young Davey Thackrey knew that when he started off for the sawmill with two sections of logs, butt-branded with the mark of Bull Brannigan . . . the woods-boss who was swift, sure death and destruction to any two-bit logger with nerve enough to defy his brass-knuckled rule!

With Loggers!

Hard-Hitting Saga of Northwest Loggers

By J. WALTON DOYLE



the Sound. Especially so if he could see any profit in it for himself. But his main interest was his logging camp, and he countenanced no local competition. His ways of business were usually outside of the pale of any law. But law had not yet come to the ruggedly primitive shores of Puget Sound. Might was still right, and, backed by his two score of woods toughs, Brannigan saw to it that he was always right.

He put a great hairy paw on Davey's arm, jerked him to a jarring halt. "Not so fast, feller."

Davey twisted his arm loose, his face suddenly tense. "Stay clear of me, Brannigan," he said, his voice brittle.

Through the vast mat of beard, there was a sneering grin on Brannigan's lips, but his little eyes were steely cold and unsmiling.

"You wouldn't be doin' somethin' you'd regret, now would you, Thackray? Gettin'

out timber all by yourself is a mighty dangerous business. Why, there's a thousand and one accidents can happen to a man workin' alone in the woods."

"I reckon it's my neck. I'll risk it," Davey told him flatly.

A rumbling bellow of laughter erupted from deep in Brannigan's chest, burst from his lips in a roar. But there was no humor in it. "You'll likely get your neck broken for your foolishness," he said when the laughter had subsided. "You'd be better off—and a sight safer—workin' for me."

Davey knew what he wanted and it wasn't any part of Brannigan's logging camp. He had heard how Brannigan treated his men. It wasn't good. As he was thinking about this, old Sam Gates, the storekeeper came out of his store, walked slowly down the steps and silently stood nearby.

"I wouldn't work in that slave camp of yours if I was down to my last dime," Davey said.

Brannigan's eyes narrowed. "And you think you can get away with it? Why, you damn fool!"

Impulse sent Davey's fist flashing out before he had time to realize what he was doing. The quick thought came to him that he might not be able to finish what he was starting. He felt a little flash of relief when the storekeeper grabbed his arm, pulled him to one side, causing his fist to go wide of Brannigan's leering face.

"Keep out of this, Sam!" Brannigan snarled at the storekeeper. "You hear? You're always stickin' your snoot in where it ain't wanted. One day it'll get busted." He turned his eyes back to Davey, let them flick up and down over the younger man with an insolent coldness. "So—you're full of beans and want to take it as it comes, eh? Mebbe you even want to take another poke at me?"

THE fire had suddenly burned out of Davey's mind. He stood there quietly, coolly studying what there was of Brannigan's face that could be seen. It was dawning on him, now. Branigan was deliberately goading him to fight. It was a planned affair. He and his woods boss would make short work of him once they got the thing rolling. When they got through he wouldn't be fit for logging, or much of anything else for that matter, for a good many months. He had seen before this what a man looked like after Brannigan and his bullies had worked on him with their spiked boots. It wasn't a pleasant memory.

He said evenly, "I nearly fell for it, Brannigan. But I'm not fighting both of you at once. I'll take you on alone, anytime, any place you say. Right now, if you're a mind to. But send your woods boss kiting."

"So, that's the way you want it?" Brannigan's voice was a trifle uneasy.

"That's the way I want it."

Brannigan spat heavily, then wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Then," he said, his beady little eyes boring into Davey. "That's the way you'll get it—but when I'm ready." He whirled around and walked away, his great bulk rocking back and forth, reminding Davey of a big brown bear he had seen wandering through the underbrush a few days before.

Gunnerson eyed Davey sourly a moment, then shrugged, turned and followed Brannigan.

The storekeeper still had a hand on Davey's arm. "If I was you, kid, I'd bunch it and light out of this neck of the woods. You go on hand-loggin' and he'll get you, some way or other. And it won't be pleasant when he does. Here, have a snort." He pulled a bottle from his pocket, offered it to Davey.

Davey shook his head, picked up his gunny sack and walked away without speaking. He still had his dream of that cabin in the woods and he figured it was a dream worth fighting for.

* * *

Two months went by in which Davey worked under the ever-present knowledge of impending danger, knowing and expecting that Brannigan would try to stop him. At first, he was cautious and wary, figuring Brannigan would use some devilish, underhanded method that would make it look like an accident, but wouldn't be. But as time wore on and nothing happened, he relaxed a little. Lately, a small thought had been wedging itself into his mind that maybe Brannigan had figured he wasn't worth bothering with, after all.

This evening, low scudding clouds brushed off their moisture on the dense, tree-studded hillsides. The light was fail-

ing and Davey decided to call it a day. He cached his Gilchrist jack, the keen, double-bitted axe and the ribbon-thin crosscut saw underneath a fallen tree and started down the hillside toward the water.

He was dog-tired, having been hard at it since daylight, sawing, undercutting, then hearing the tall, heavy-barked Douglas firs crash to the ground with rending groans. Then came hours of back-breaking work as he limbed the huge trees, bucked them into lengths and worked them down the slope to the water with the aid of the Gilchrist jack.

There had been a cold drizzle throughout the day and, despite the cumbersome "tin" pants and jacket he was wearing, he was soaked to the skin. As he plowed on down through the rank growth of huckleberry and foot-snagging salal his clothes picked up added weight of moisture.

But this went unnoticed. Even in his utter weariness he was conscious of a deep sense of satisfaction. He hadn't been his own boss long enough to quit enjoying the freedom it brings. And, tomorrow, when the three big trees he had felled and worked up today were in the water, the peace inside of his boom-sticks would be filled out. A full section would be ready for a tug to tow it to the mill.

Roughly, he figured he had about two hundred thousand feet, which would bring him an average of ten dollars a thousand, for the logs were all straight, true grained and conk free. Even after he had paid the tow bill and his grub bill at Sam Gate's store he would have the better part of two thousand dollars left. That was a lot of money. Why, a man could even get married and set up housekeeping on that.

He grinned at the thought and hastened his steps, for darkness was closing in. Too, the box social at the Port Madison school house started at seven o'clock that evening and he didn't want to miss any of it. Neither did he want to miss a second of Martha Driscoll's company. It had been two weeks since he had last seen Martha and asked her to go to the social with him, and two weeks was a long time. He chewed reflectively at his lower lip and wondered just how a man went about proposing to a lady.

He was on the beach, now. Skirting the branches of a wind-felled tree, he walked rapidly around the curve in the beach that would bring him to the little, sheltered cove where he had his logs boomed.

Suddenly, he halted. His eyes widened. Blank astonishment hit his face and his breathing stopped momentarily.

The little sloop on which he lived lay at anchor in the cove, rocking slightly in the chop that the outgoing tide and freshening wind kicked up. But nowhere on the surface of the small expanse of water did he see his boom of logs. Only the four boom-sticks, clinging close together with the drag of the tide as they pulled at the rope anchoring them to a tree on the water's edge.

He was running, now, though he didn't realize it, his caulked boots slipping and sliding on the wet rocks, his breath coming in labored gasps.

Around the point he pulled up again, his eyes darting out into the murky gloom of the main channel. His hands balled slowly to tight fists, the knuckles showing white through the skin. He felt a heavy, leaden coldness in the pit of his stomach.

OUT in the main channel he could make out long, dark, deep-floating blobs. They were scattered over the water as far as his eyes could penetrate the dusk. Brannigan hadn't forgotten him, after all.

Standing there with slow anger burning through his body like a ground fire eating its way through a virgin stand of timber, he realized what a fool he had been. He might have known Brannigan would wait to strike until he could turn the trick so their would be a profit in it for him. It was a clever piece of work, nicely timed.

Davey saw it all with a clarity that made him curse at himself bitterly. Waiting until the section was all but filled out and ready to go to the mill, Brannigan had sent in his bully boys on the quiet and they had loosened his boom chains when the tide was on the turn. The outgoing tide had taken the logs into the main channel and scattered them so a man in a skiff or sail boat wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance of salvaging more than a half dozen.

Davey knew the tide currents of the locality well, and, knowing them, saw how Brannigan had figured them to his advantage. During the night his logs would travel with the tide down the main channel past Brannigan's camp and log dump.

About daylight the incoming tide would throw them over into the big eddy that circled the mouth of the cove just above Brannigan's camp. There the logs would stay, trapped in the giant eddy, slowly circling the mouth of the cove. Brannigan would have all hands and the cook out in every skiff he could commandeer, snaking the logs into small bunches where his steam tug could put a line on them and tow them to his booms.

This time tomorrow night, Bull Brannigan would be the richer by two thousand dollars worth of Davey's logs. Logs he had spent four months of soul-searing sweat and patient, muscle-knotting work to get into the water.

Worse, there wasn't a thing he could do about it. He had no way of proving that Brannigan had cut his boom loose save for the caulk-marked boot prints in the sand that he had noted. And those would be washed out by the tide before the night was over. Neither could he get his logs back again, though they were each butt-branded with his stamp iron. The unwritten law of the Sound was that free-floating logs belonged to the salvager, regardless of butt brands. Besides, Brannigan would have the point of possession in his favor. That was ten tenths of the law, here. And Brannigan could back it up with his band of skid-road toughs.

A great, black bitterness welled up in Davey as he walked back slowly toward his skiff, his shoulders sagging wearily. He untied it, shoved it into the water and rowed out to his sloop. Aboard, he made a fire in the tiny range, stripped off his wet clothing, sponged himself and put on his good suit. He made coffee, but ate nothing, the thought of food gone from his harried mind.

As he drank the steaming brew he wondered morosely what he could say to Martha if she asked him if his boom was filled out yet. Should he tell that he had been tricked by a ruse so simple that any knee pants young one would have had the sense to guard against?

No, he thought not. A lady wouldn't be wanting to marry a man who was so senseless as to give away four months of his back-breaking labor, not to mention all of the profits.

He put on his good hat, got back into the skiff and rowed ashore. Once he uttered a short, mirthless laugh. "At least," he told himself gloomily, "I'm not going to have to worry about how to propose to a lady . . . tonight."

Martha Driscoll lived with an uncle, her parents both having been dead for a number of years. The uncle was a taciturn but kind hearted old Quaker and insisted that Davey should take his buggy, saying that no niece of his would muddy her feet while there was a horse in the stall and a buggy in the barn.

Martha was wearing a simple, dark green dress that seemed to have been molded to her lovely figure. The white scarf she had drawn over the back of her head set off her black hair. Her quiet beauty was breath-taking and robbed Davey of even the few words he was usually able to lay his tongue to in her presence.

She was quick to notice. "Davey . . . thee are so silent. Is something wrong?" Martha's parents had been Quakers. Often, when excited or concerned, she would lapse into their quaint way of expression.

He shook his head. "No. Tired is all."

She patted his arm gently. "Thee should not work so hard, Davey. I wish thee would heed my words and not labor on the Sabbath. Why . . . what reason is there that a young man like thee should make himself old before his time?"

Davey ached to tell her that the reason was sitting right beside him. But he didn't, for he decided that any man who was as broke—and so foolish as to let himself be tricked into being broke—had no right to make pretty speeches to a lady. So he kept his silence, which brought a little furrow between Martha's eyes and caused her to withdraw her hand from his arm.

In the festive air of the gathering at the school house Davey started to emerge from his cocoon of gloom, but the sudden appearance of Brannigan and a half dozen of his woods toughs pushed him back into his despondency.

Brannigan and his men were all a little drunk. Enough so to be noisy and a trifle officious. Davey joined half-heartedly in the games that were played before supper, but kept away from Brannigan, knowing that the deep burning anger in him might burst into flame if fanned even slightly. Any other time he would have welcomed the chance to accuse Brannigan of breaking his boom,

but tonight he was on his good behavior, for Martha looked with disfavor on harsh words or violence.

CHAPTER TWO

Two Rounds For Brannigan

BUT Brannigan had already spotted Davey and every time he looked up, Brannigan's little beady eyes were openly sneering at him.

When supper time came the lunch boxes were all piled on a large table in the center of the room and spirited bidding commenced. Because Martha had whispered, "Wait for the box with the scarlet ribbon," Davy waited—and felt dismal as his hand despairingly fingered the three silver dollars and the two coppers in his pants pocket.

When the auctioneer held up the box with the wide scarlet ribbon, Davey said quickly, "One dollar!"

The auctioneer grinned and jibed, "Pretty sure, aren't you, Davey boy? I'll bet your girl's been whispering to you."

Davey's face reddened at the good-natured laughter from the crowd. But a deep, rumbling overtone of hoarse mirth from across the room made heads turn that way.

Brannigan stilled his bellowing, ran fingers through his beard. "Dollar, the pup says? And for a beautiful box like that? Make it ten."

"Ten!" the autcioneer shouted gleefully, anticipating a spirited session of bidding. "Who will make it fifteen?"

Women in the crowd gasped. Fifteen dollars for a box of homemade sandwiches and cake. Why—it was scandalous.

"Fifteen," Davey said before he realized the words were coming from his own mouth.

"Twenty-five!" Brannigan came back quickly.

Davey let the three silver dollars slide through his fingers in his pocket. *You're a fool, letting Brannigan goad you on,* he told himself, then said tensely, "Fifty dollars!" He didn't know how he would manage to pay for the box if Brannigan dropped it on him, but he knew he had to have it.

Heads were turning expectantly toward Brannigan. He waved a fat paw nonchalantly. "Seventy-five!"

Davey's eyes were clashing with Brannigan's. He opened his mouth to bid a hundred, but Martha grabbed his arm.

"No, Davey," she whispered fiercely. "Thee should not do it. No lunch is worth that. Let him have it." She squeezed his arm hard.

Davey moistened his lips. Looking up at the auctioneer who was expectantly waiting, he shrugged, then turned away.

There was a sudden release of the tension in the room and everyone started talking at once. Brannigan came blustering through the crowd to claim the box and Martha. Davey pushed on out to the door, feeling the eyes on his back and the tautness inside of him. Brannigan had bested him again.

On the porch, Davey rolled a cigarette, his tense fingers suddenly clumsy, spilling half of the tobacco from the paper. Old Sam Gates, the storekeeper, came out, put a kindly hand on his shoulder. "You did the sensible thing, lad."

"Giving in to Brannigan isn't my idea of bein' sensible," Davey said tightly.

"Mebbe not. But it's a sight healthier."

"He keeps pushing me and I'll forget about my health."

"Keep yore shirt on, Davey. After all, he's only goin' to eat supper with her." He pulled a bottle from his hip pocket, extended it toward Davey. "Here . . . have a snort. Cool you off."

Davey shook his head, said, "Thanks, no."

The old fellow took a hefty swallow, then re-pocketed the bottle. "Well . . . simmer down, son," he said, then went back into the hall.

Davey waited impatiently, smoking three cigarettes. Finally the fiddles started to scrape and the mellow tones of the accordion joined in. The supper was over and the dancing had started.

He threw away his last cigarette, went back inside, his eyes searching for Martha. He saw Brannigan at the same time the big man spotted him. He was in the middle of the floor, whirling his partner with a lithe ease that didn't fit his bigness. As Davey watched, Brannigan raised a hand and waved derisively toward him.

"Damn him!" Davey muttered, his eyes narrowing. The girl in Brannigan's arms was Martha.

Davey waited by the door until the waltz

ended, the anger building up within him, then he pushed his way through the dancers. Brannigan still had one of Martha's little hands encased in his big paws, as he beamed down at her and talked in a muffled rumble.

Little flecks of red danced before Dave's eyes. He grabbed Brannigan's arm, jerked it lose from Martha's hand. The big man turned slowly, the beard parting over his mouth as he gave Davey a derisive grin.

"Well, well! If it isn't Davey, boy. If you log like you bid on lady's lunch boxes, you'll never get rich."

Davey said, "I'll have a word with you outside, Brannigan," and he suddenly realized he was breathing thinly from the top of his lungs.

"Davy . . .! No!" Martha pleaded, her face paling.

Brannigan let loose his rumbling laugh. "If you will pardon me, my dear, I will go out and teach this young whelp a lesson in manners." He bowed with mock courtesy, turned to Davey. "At your pleasure, Thackray."

THEY started toward the door, Davey in the lead. Martha ran after them, caught at Davey's arm. "If thee fight I'll never speak to thee again."

Yes, Davey thought, *that's possible.* One of them probably wouldn't be able to speak or be spoken to when this was over. But he walked on without looking at her, his eyes straight ahead, not hearing the undertone of fear for him in her voice.

The atmosphere in the hall had suddenly gone tense. Men knew a fight was in the making—a fight in which someone was very apt to be carried off more dead than alive. Leaving their women, they pushed at one another to get to the door first, several of them grabbing up lamps from the tables.

Outside, Davey and Brannigan stepped from the porch to the ground. Brannigan shed his coat, hung it carefully on the porch railing, then turned to face Davey. "How'll you have it?" he asked.

Davey's eyes flicked over Brannigan's tightly stretched shirt front. With coat off, the man looked bigger than ever. "Nothing barred," he replied, knowing that Brannigan would fight that way regardless.

"Cocky, ain't you, pup?"

"No!" Davey said flatly. "But I'm goin' to break a bone in your body for every log you let out of my boom."

"You talk in riddles," Brannigan said quickly, eyes not looking at Davey. "I'm sorry I haven't got my corks on," he added, using the woods term for the spike-soled boots loggers wear. "I'd like to mark you up a little. But this will do nearly as good a job." He pulled a short bar of steel from his pocket, fitted it to his fist.

The steel bar was bent back to itself in a close horseshoe shape, just opening enough left to let the fingers through and clench them, leaving one loop of the horseshoe running back over the knuckles. Known as a "jaw-breaker" to the loggers, it was a brutal, cruel weapon and equally as dangerous as a pair of caulk-studded boots. But Davey knew he couldn't protest, for he, himself, had said that nothing was to be barred.

Without warning, Brannigan suddenly lashed out with the fist encased in the jaw-breaker. Davey only had time to jerk his head slightly. The blow, aimed at his nose, caught him a glancing blow on the cheek, laying the flesh open to the bone.

The stinging pain sent blind anger raging through him. He had planned to stay cool, to steer clear of Brannigan's bearlike arms and try to tire the big man while working on him with blows to the face. But that was forgotten now.

He tore into Brannigan with the force of an explosion, his flashing fists almost playing a tune on Brannigan's face. Brannigan gave ground, his beard turning a quick red from the blood spurting from his lanced flesh.

But he was a bull for taking punishment. He stopped backing up, took Davey's blows unheeded as he drove a boot at Davey's groin.

Davey saw it coming, twisted, took the boot on his thigh. For a moment, he thought his leg was broken. The pain was so intense that it paralyzed his leg and he could move neither forward or backward

Sensing his advantage, Brannigan dived at Davey, his arms stretched wide to encircle him. Unable to move, Davey watched the other hurtle toward him and a touch of panic needled through his brain, knowing that he was as close to having his back broken as he had ever been, for that's what

would surely happen if Brannigan got him in the grip of those arms.

There was already a gleam of triumph in Brannigan's eyes as he moved the last few inches. Davey thought, *you got yourself into this, now let's see you get yourself out.* There was one way he could try, but it didn't have much in its favor.

He crouched as low as he could and still keep his balance with one leg. Just before Brannigan's hands reached him, he threw all of his weight into a driving blow with his shoulder aimed at the big man's midriff.

But Brannigan sensed what was coming, sidestepped, caught Davey as he was about to fall. In the next second, Davey's tortured ribs bowed an agony as those massive arms squeezed down on him.

Brannigan lifted him clear of the ground as he put more pressure into the grip, harsh grunts coughing through his beard.

The big man's beard scratched at his face and the band of fire through his chest was so agonizing that he thought he was going to faint.

He kicked backwards at Brannigan's shins, but the effort was feeble and ineffectual and used up what little oxygen remained in his tortured lungs. He knew that another few seconds and he would be done for.

The closeness of Brannigan's beard was an irritant that sent a flash of thought through his mind. Turning his head, he sank his teeth into Brannigan's ear, felt the warm blood gush into his mouth.

Brannigan squealed, loosened his hold, backed off, clapping a hand to his ear. Davey grabbed a badly needed lungful of air and it seemed to burn clear down to his toes. Then he was leaping toward Brannigan.

His fist sank into the matt of beard, kept on going, blasted to a jolting stop against Brannigan's wind pipe.

The big man gagged, gasped for air as his face turned a sickly gray. He backed away from Davey, holding his open hands in front of him as he tried to fend off the quick, cutting blows Davey was raining on his nose and eyes.

He was bellowing again, hoarse screams of pain, rage and fear coming from him like a hurt animal. Still backing, he passed close to the fringe of the crowd standing next to the porch.

It was a dark spot, shaded from the lamps on the porch by the figures of the men standing there. As Davey passed, one of Brannigan's men struck out and hit Davey in the back of the neck with his fist. The blow, though lacking in hurting power, was so unexpected that it jolted him from head to foot. He whirled, caught the look of assumed innocence on the man's face, sent one of his fists crashing full into the man's mouth.

Only when he felt the pain of the man's teeth against his knuckles did he realize what a foolish thing he had done. From the corner of his eye he could see Brannigan leaping toward him, taking advantage of his divided attention.

Davey jumped sideways. But he didn't see Brannigan's foreman shift his weight, or the foot that Gunnerson stuck out. He tripped over it, fell sideways.

Brannigan was on him instantly, his big bulk knocking the wind from Davey by sheer force of weight. Knee in Davey's back, he grabbed Davey's right arm, pulled it up behind his back. Through this new wave of pain, Davey could feel the muscles and tendons creaking on the verge of breaking point.

Levering the imprisoned arm, Brannigan forced Davey to roll part way over. Then the fist carrying the jaw-breaker rose and flashed down, smashing into the side of Davey's face. Davey felt a tooth pop clear of the gum, then a heavy, quick darkness engulfed him.

It was old Sam Gates, the storekeeper, who grabbed Brannigan's arm and stopped the next blow before it landed.

"You've done him in. That's enough!" he told Brannigan sharply.

BRANNIGAN let loose an angry roar, but cut it off in the middle, his eyes widening as he saw the small caliber pistol in Sam Gates' hand.

"Buttin' in again, hey?" Brannigan snarled.

"No. Buttin' you out. Git up!"

Brannigan got to his feet slowly, the glare in his eyes a horrible thing to see. "I oughta kill him." he muttered, his words jerky with emotion.

"Try it an' you'll taste lead, so help me," Sam Gates threatened.

Brannigan growled unintelligently, look-

ing more like a bleeding bear than a man. He pulled out a bandanna, sopped blood from the mat of beard. "He crosses me again it'll be the last time." He turned and pushed his way through the crowd and went back into the school house. The crowd broke up and followed him.

Fiddles began to scrape again, the accordion picked up the tune. Outside, old Sam Gates was left alone with the unconscious form on the ground.

He picked Davey up and carried him to the porch, then went to the pump in the school yard, brought back water and washed the blood from Davey's face.

The party was breaking up when Davey finally stirred and opened his eyes. Old Sam was still hovering over him. Sam helped him to his feet, where he stood swaying slightly, trying to throw off the veil of pain that gripped him.

"He dang near did you in, kid," Sam told him. "That arm ain't broken, is it?"

Davey shook his head, grinned weakly. "Just bent some. If you've still got that bottle, I'll take a snort, now, Sam."

Sam pulled out the bottle, uncorked it, held it out. Davey tilted it back and the fiery liquid felt good as it seared down into his stomach.

He still had the bottle at his lips when he saw her. Martha walked by and down the steps on Brannigan's arm, never turning her eyes his way. But Brannigan gave him a quick, triumphant glare as they passed.

They went to the buggy and Brannigan helped her in, then Brannigan threw the hitch weight into the back of the buggy and climbed in beside her.

"Don't do it, lad," Sam cautioned, but Davey was already down the steps. He reached the buggy just as Brannigan picked up the reins.

Davey stepped close to the buggy, put a hand up on the edge of the seat. "Martha . . . you've got to listen. . . ."

Brannigan slapped the horse's back with the reins, shouted, "Gee-up!"

Martha sat stiffly upright, her face pale looking straight ahead. The rear wheel passed over Davey's toes before he could jump back.

He stood there watching the buggy wheel away, anger numbing the pain in his toes. "And I was worrying about how to propose to a lady," he muttered, then laughed, and it was a hollow, bitter sound—and lonely.

CHAPTER THREE

An Eye for an Eye

HE WAS a long time getting back to his sloop for hurrying made his heart quicken, and even the pounding blood in his veins seemed to hurt. He felt as if he had been beaten all over with a club. The side of his jaw where the jaw-buster had landed was a fiery ache. He rubbed it tenderly with an explorative finger and found that there was a hole about the size of a penny cut completely through the skin to the inside of his mouth.

By the time he was aboard his boat he had called himself every kind of a fool he could lay his tongue to. As he sat staring at the little stove, waiting for it to chase away the damp chill, his mind turned from himself to Brannigan. Suddenly, his eyes narrowed a trifle and his face seemed to lengthen, then he rose to his feet and closed the dampers on the stove. There was a singleness of purpose in the set of his chin as he quickly changed into his tin pants, wool shirt and caulked boots. Within five minutes he had pulled the anchor and was beating up the Sound against a quartering wind. It was raining again, and the wind driven pellets of water stinging against his face felt cooling, helped to clear his mind.

"It takes two to play a game," he said into the night, looking off across the water towards where Brannigan's camp lay hidden under a curtain of darkness.

He was well out into the channel when he came about and tacked toward shore, angling the beach so he would hit well below Brannigan's camp. He pulled in behind a point where the sloop would be out of sight of Brannigan's camp and dropped anchor, then went quietly ashore in the skiff, first having muffled the oar locks with pieces of sacking.

Ashore, he worked his way cautiously along the beach toward the place where Brannigan dumped his logs in the water and boomed them. In the lighter shade of darkness over the water he finally saw what his eyes were straining to make out— hundreds of logs floating on the water, imprisoned inside the boom logs.

Suddenly, he crouched. On hands and

knees he moved slowly and silently up the beach to the shelter of the dense foliage along the beach edge. He had been afraid of that. In the distance a match had flickered, flared up, wavered as some man fed it into his pipe bowl. Then it winked out in a long arc.

Brannigan wasn't taking any chances. He had his booms guarded against just such a plan as was in Davey's mind. But Davey smiled in the darkness, hurting his sore jaw as he did, then working his way up into the woods, rolled a cigarette, sat down and calmly smoked it. The smile and his stoic acceptance of the situation was brought on by the fact that Davey figured Brannigan's greed was going to make the big man relax his watchfulness within an hour or two. When that happened, Davey was going to move, and move fast.

He knew that when daylight came Brannigan would have every last man of his crew on the water salvaging the logs he had caused to be loosened from Davey's boom. That meant every man, even the one guarding the boom, here, for Brannigan would be confident that no one would dare molest his logs in broad daylight.

As dawn began to gray the darkness, Davey worked his way quietly back to the beach. The guard was still there, sitting on a log at the water's edge, fast asleep. Davey fumed silently, fidgeting. But in a few minutes a figure appeared on the bank, hailed the man awake and motioned with his arm. The fellow got up stiffly, went up the bank and out of sight.

Davey waited another few minutes, then made his way around the shore to the inner boom. With nimble, catlike grace learned from many hours spent on the booms, he raced out over the logs to the outside booms. Quickly and knowingly, he worked at first one corner of a section, then raced to another, fighting to get the heavy chains loose, yet not make any noise. He was well aware that if he was caught in this act, it would be curtains. When he dashed back across the logs toward shore, two sections, chained together in the middle, were free floating.

He stood on the beach a moment, breathing heavily, watching the two sections as they moved slowly away from the rest of the logs. At this point, the tide had a strong offshore set and the open water between the two sections and the remaining ones widened at about the pace of a man walking.

A small grin quirked his lips. So far, so good. Then he turned and hurried back around the point and rowed out to his sloop.

In about fifteen minutes the head end of the two sections appeared around the point, traveling with a maddening slowness. But he noted with satisfaction that they were gradually being taken out in the stream by the action of the tide and the wind that was quartering down the Sound. He estimated their drift between three and four miles an hour.

Watching them, the full realization of the enormity of the task he had cut out came to him. It was a crazy, foolhardy thing he knew and his chances of getting away with it were one in a thousand. For a moment, he wavered, thinking perhaps he had better throw up the whole thing. Then a mental picture of Brannigan's leering face floated before his eyes and he put the doubt out of his mind.

HE WAITED until the logs were nearly out of sight around a bend in the shoreline, then pulled anchor and put sail on the sloop. Coming out from behind the point, he watched warily, half expecting to see one of Brannigan's boats beating out towards the logs. But only a wide expanse of tiny, white-capped swells and wheeling gulls met his eyes. For the first time since last night he forgot the ache in his shoulder and face. His head went back and he laughed deeply.

He cut in close to the two sections, luffed and dropped his canvas and made fast to the head boom stick. Quickly, he made a bridle from the heaviest line he had aboard. Ten minutes later, he was well out ahead of the boom with it in tow.

He thought grimly how futile it must look. A tiny sail-boat hooked to that many logs and trying to tow them. As far as the towing was concerned, it was futile. But he had possession of them and, unless some one had seen him loosen them on shore, he could swear that he had picked them up as free-floating logs.

That made them his by the unwritten law of the Sound—his until he could get them to Slater's mill and sell them. And he was going to see that it stayed that way. He went below and came back on deck with a short-barreled carbine, his eyes drifting

back over the water towards Brannigan's

As the shoreline slowly drifted by he kept looking back over his shoulder, watching and expecting to see a boat put out in pursuit. He knew that Brannigan owned a steam tug, and that, once the loss was discovered, he would have it frothing the Sound waters in a mad hunt for his logs.

Once he rose to his feet, his heart quickening, sure that he saw a boat in the distance. But after watching it a moment he realized that it was only the image of a surfaced gull, magnified and distorted by the early morning mists, hovering over the water.

About ten o'clock he noticed a tendril of smoke drifting up from behind a point ahead. In a few minutes a steam tug hove into sight, shoving a watery bone ahead of it as it came up the sound.

As it drew closer he saw that it was the *Vigilant,* owned and skippered by a salty old codger by the name of Hellander Wellington, but better known as old "Hell Well."

Davey jumped to his feet, waving both arms to attract the tug's attention, hope rising high within him. If he could get Hell Well to take the logs in tow. . . . He ran to the bow, still waving frantically. But it wasn't necessary. Hell Well had thrown over his wheel and the tug was heading towards the logs in a wide arc.

As the tug neared it let go of the watery bone, seemed to settle back in the water contentedly. White water suddenly churned at her stern and she squatted to a stop within a few feet of Davey's sloop.

Old Hell Well's head popped out of a pilot house window.

"Now," he yelled, his deep voice booming over the water like a fog horn gone berserk, "I've seen everythin'. Where in the name of Tophet are them logs towin' that sloop, Davey?"

Davey grinned. "Salter's mill at Port Madison. But I'd make it quicker if you were to hook on. You want the job, Hell?"

Hell Well shook his head. "Bull Brannigan sent word he wanted me to come up an' help him boom some logs. Reckon I better git along."

"I'll pay you double your usual towing fee," Davey said urgently. Here was a chance to get the logs into the mill before Brannigan discovered his loss, a chance he hadn't figured on, and he didn't mean to let it slip through his fingers for the sake of a few dollars.

Hell Well considered the offer a moment, then sighed and shook his head again. "Reckon I hadn't better. You know how cantankerous that there Bull Brannigan is?"

"Yeah," Davey replied flatly. "I know. And I know that while he's passing the butter for your bread he's apt to steal most of it himself."

"Yeh. That's so . . . but, at least, a feller gits part of it, anyhow. Well, so long, Davey. I better mosey."

"Wait!" Davey shouted desperately. "I'll raise that offer to three time your regular towing charge. And you can have your money just as soon as the mill gives me a scale on the logs, which shouldn't take more than a couple of hours at the most."

Hell Well's eyes narrowed. He stared so long at Davey that the flaming match he was putting to his pipe burned his fingers and he dropped it, cursing. "Jest what are you up to, young feller? You must have a reason to want to throw your money around so promiscuous."

"I've got a reason. A good one," Davey told him.

"Female?" Hell Well asked, cocking his head to one side.

"Yes," Davey replied, hoping the answer would convince Hell Well, though it didn't convince himself.

Hell Well spat down into the water. "Nope. I'd better not."

Davey could see that Hell Well was weakening, but his fear of Brannigan was greater than his desire for money. Hell Well moved back from the window. Bells tinkled below in the engine room. White water churned suddenly at the tug's stern.

Frantically, Davy waved a hand. "Hey, Hell," he shouted. "I'll throw in a quart of the best whiskey in Port Madison."

Hell Well's face came back to the window. Bells tinkled again in the engine room. The white water at the tug's stern subsided as suddenly as it had appeared.

"What's that you say? A quart of what?"

"Three times your regular towing charge and a quart of the best whiskey in Port Madison."

Hell Well rubbed his chin reflectively. "Wal . . . All right. You talked me into

it. Mebbe I shouldn't, but yore jest a young feller tryin' to git along." He rang the engine room again, whirled the wheel spokes through his hands.

"HEAR tell you been hand-loggin', Davey?" Hell Well shouted as the tug started forward. "Must be doin all right from the looks a those two sections."

Davey nodded a reply, feeling grim satisfaction as the tug whirled around in a tight circle, came up alongside the sloop and squatted to a stop again. Davey loosed the tow line and handed it to the deck hand, hoping he wouldn't notice the butt brands on the logs. Hell Well hung out of the pilot house window, looking back, and Davey thought he detected a little suspicion in his eyes.

But Hell Well said no more. He took up the slack in the towline gently, then rang for full ahead. Davey let the boom slide by, jumped off and made the sloop fast to the tail end so it would tow out behind.

He had been so well occupied that he hadn't thought to look back down the Sound to see if any one was coming this way yet. Now, he saw that there was a boat in the distance. It was another steam tug, its bow pointed this way, a lazy drift of smoke from its stack.

"Looks like I'm in for a fight, after all," Davey muttered, feeling the elation of a moment ago drain away. "I suppose old Hell Well will cut me loose if there's any shootin'."

But as he watched the other tug, he saw something that made his spirits bounce back up again. Stretched out behind the tug was a long, flat dark colored blob that could have been but one thing. Logs.

He dived below, grabbed his glass and hurried back on deck. Glass to eye, he studied the distant tug several moments. It was Brannigan's tug, all right, as he had suspected. And it was towing a single section of logs. Wryly, Davey muttered, "My logs!" Brannigan was evidently in a big hurry to get them to the mill and get the money for them.

But, though he knew Brannigan's tug had his logs in tow, he felt relieved, for it told him that Brannigan had not yet discovered the loss of his own two sections. Even so, he knew he was going to need luck with him to get these two sections to the mill, scaled and sold before Brannigan's tug got in. Any way he figured, it was going to be close, but his chances had so improved over what they had been a few minutes back that he wasn't going to borrow trouble until it was on his front porch.

Riding the boom, Davey started a quick count of the logs in an effort to get a rough estimate of the board feet. When he was through counting, he whistled softly. The total was far bigger than he had dreamed it would be. Brannigan's wrath was going to be a horrible thing to see when he learned of his loss, and the thought sobered Davey.

It was mid-afternoon when they finally pulled in to the mill. Davey cast anxious eyes at the distant tug and saw that, pulling but one section to their two, it had closed the gap between them considerably.

As Hell Well and the deck hand made the sections fast, Davey tore up the mill dock to the office. Slater, the mill owner, was there himself. He stepped to the door, looked down at the two secions.

"Say . . . ! You're doing all right for a hand-logger, young fellow," he told Davey.

"Can you give me a quick scaling?" Davey asked, the words coming fast. "I've promised to pay off the tow bill today."

Slater frowned. "Well—it isn't customary. But I suppose we can. But tell me, why is it you young fellows are always in such a hurry these days? A body would think you were running away from something, the way all of you act."

Davey thought, *he's more right than he knows*. But he said, "I don't know. Just like to get things done with, I guess." He told Slater he had an errand up town to take care of, but would be back by the time the count was in.

He went back to the tug, yelled for Hell Well. The skipper was waiting, coat on. As they walked up the dock Hell Well asked dryly, "You log with an axe, or a gun?"

Davey swung his head around toward the other, but Hell Well was looking straight ahead. "Why?"

"Oh . . . I was jest kinda curious, is all. I happened to look back and noticed you primin' a rifle and takin' a right close peek at that tug behind us with yore glass."

"You can be curious about the damndest things. Some day that curiosity's liable to

get you in bad. I'd watch it, if I were you." Davey's tone was bantering, but he was deadly serious. Hell Well seemed to sense that, too, for he just grunted and lapsed into silence.

CHAPTER FOUR

Log Jam Showdown

SO . . . he's wise, Davey thought quickly. Then he told himself defensively, *well, what of it? The logs are still mine by right of salvage. No one saw me let them loose.* But the argument didn't satisfy him. Then he began to wonder if Hell Well was leading up to trying to bleed him for more than he had agreed to pay for the tow. Such as a fifty-fifty split. He doubted it, for Hell Well was known to be a pretty square shooter. But he determined to find out.

"So you saw the butt-brands?" he asked.

"I got eyes for seein', a mouth for sayin', an' a mind to tell me when to sheer off," Hell Well replied curtly. "When I'm in a fog I toot my whistle to git an echo so's I won't run onto the beach."

"Meaning what?"

"I got yore echo, young feller. It's yore business about the logs. You keep it thataway. All I'm wantin' out a the deal is jest what you agreed to pay: triple charges an' a bottle of bug-eye. Fair 'nough?"

Davey grinned. "Fair enough."

He bought Hell Well his bottle, had a drink with him, then they both started back toward the mill, walking leisurely. At the wharf's inner end Davey peered intently out into the water. He was surprised to see Brannigan's tug close by the mill dock. It had just turned loose from its tow and was now gently bunting the section around to get it in line with the boom piling. Urgency set him on a near run down the dock. He hadn't figured that the other tug would be in this soon. And if Brannigan had come along with his tow, things were going to be nip and tuck.

Slater stepped from the office door as Davey came hurrying down the wharf. He had a heavy scowl on his face and his eyes studied Davey with a piercing gaze. Davey thought, *well, this is it.*

"Those logs you told me were yours are butt-branded with Brannigan's stamp,"

"That's right," Davey replied, trying to keep his voice level. "They are."

Slater's face darkened. "I don't know what your game is, young fellow, but I know you've got a lot of gall trying to sell me Brannigan's timber."

"It isn't Brannigan's. Those logs are mine by right of salvage. I found two sections floating free and clear out in the channel just below—"

"How am I to know you're telling the truth?" Slater growled. "You got any witnesses? I can't pay you for them on just your word, alone."

This is fine, fine, Davey thought bitterly. I all but get the money in my pocket, then this has to happen. He stood there not knowing what to say or what to do. But Hell Well's rumbling, fog horn voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Yore dang tootin' he's got witnesses," Hell Well was saying. "Me, for one. I was headin' up the Sound to tow some logs for Brannigan when I saw these here two sections floatin' loose. I headed for 'em, figger'n on latchin' onto 'em myself an' makin' a little easy money. But Davey had seen 'em from shore, too. He beat me to 'em by hardly a tow rope length."

Slater considered this, but Davey could see that he wasn't yet fully convinced. Hell Well must have seen it, too, for he stepped to the edge of the dock, shouted down to the deck hand on the tug.

"Hey . . . you, there, Jeff. Didn't we see that two sections of logs floatin' free an' try to get to 'em afore Davey, here, did?"

The deck hand looked up at them, his face blank with puzzle, but he nodded, said, "Sure did."

Davey thought, *Hell Well's got his deck hand well trained. I'll buy 'em both a case of whiskey if this turns out right.*

Slater shrugged. "Well, all right," he said, still a shade of doubt in his tone. "Come on into the office and I'll pay you off. But I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when Brannigan gets word of this."

That might happen quicker than you think, Davey thought, glancing over his shoulder at Brannigan's tug. But he saw no sign of Brannigan on the deck, only two men working on the after deck, stowing tow line with a slow moving manner. They had discovered nothing, as yet, to get excited about, but Davey had a feeling that it

wouldn't be long. He grimaced at the thought.

SO INTENT was his mind upon pursuit by water, that Davey hadn't given a thought to the fact that it might come by land, instead. And that's what was happening at the very moment.

An hour before, back at Sam Gates' crossroads store, Bull Brannigan had been buying cigars and bragging about a stroke of luck he just had in salvaging a full section of free-floating logs. Brannigan was putting it on thick because Martha Driscoll happened to be in the store buying dress goods and thread.

Brannigan's swaggerings and bragging irritated Sam. He broke into the big man's loud talk by asking, "And who was the unlucky one to lose the section?"

Brannigan laughed harshly, then said. "I'll give you one guess. His brand mark is D.T. He'll have the D. T.'s all right, when he finds his boom broken and me with his logs." He threw back his head and roared at his own joke.

Martha Driscoll's hand flew to her throat, her lips parted, forming a silent "Oh!"

The front door swung back and one of Brannigan's men ran in, the caulks in his boots making a skirling sound as they bit into the dry wood of the floor.

"Bull, yo're two sections short in the outside boom. The night boom man says they was there this mornin'. But they sure as hell ain't there now."

Brannigan swung slowly towards him, his face sobering. "You mean to tell me two full sections could get loose and drift away on a calm day like this—and in broad daylight? You fool! Some one's stolen them. And I think I know who, and where he'll take them." He strode rapidly toward the door. "And when I catch up with him. . . ." His words were cut off by the slamming door.

Sam Gates looked after Brannigan a moment, then turned to Martha. "If yo're goin' home I'll ride you in my buggy. I'm closin' up for a spell. Got some important business over to Port Madison."

"Thee are not fooling me, Sam," Martha said. "I'm going along."

"But Martha. . . There might be some rough stuff. You better hadn't come."

"Bosh!" Martha said. "Davey should be warned. Another beating like last night might kill him."

"The way you acted last night I figgered you wouldn't keer if Davey was alive or dead." Sam told her, but there was a question in his tone.

A flush crimsoned her face. "Davey is very dear to me, Sam. I was punishing him. I told him I wouldn't speak to him if he fought. I had to keep my word."

"Ummmm," Sam said. "Well let's quit jawin' an' start gettin', then."

BACK on the mill-dock in Port Madison, Davey started to follow Slater into the office. A sudden clatter of hoofbeats tearing down the dock halted them. A horse pulled to a rearing stop and Davey had to jump back to keep from being trampled. The big, bearded man who slid from the saddle was Brannigan.

Speak of the devil, Davey thought, the hair on the back of his neck crinkling a little, for Brannigan had jerked a pistol from under his belt, had it leveled at Davey.

Under the mat of beard, Brannigan's face was pale with anger, a paleness that made the cuts stand out lividly where Davey's fists had lanced the flesh. His eyes were squeezed to slits and danced with unveiled hate.

"I had it figgered this way," Brannigan said harshly. "I was right, I see. Deliberately stealin' a man's logs, and in broad daylight. I knew you didn't have much sense, but even then I gave you credit for more than that."

"I didn't steal them. I salvaged them," Davey told him tautly. "Just the same way you salvaged the logs that *broke* from my boom yesterday."

"Put down that gun, Brannigan," Slater broke in. "Davey has witnesses to prove that he found your two sections floating free."

"Hell Well, here, and his deck hand both saw it. In fact, Hell Well pretty near beat Davey to them."

Brannigan took this bit of information and chewed it over in his mind for a moment. Suddely he stuck the gun back under his belt, his lips sneering at Davey. He said, "I'm goin' to teach you not to pull any more tricks on Bull Brannigan. I'm gonna break yore back." He hunched his head down between his shoulders and ad-

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vanced slowly on Davey. "Then," he growled, still coming on, "I'm gonna teach a certain tow boat skipper and his deck hand that lyin' to me is a one way ticket to the hospital."

Brannigan had been a law unto himself for so long that he had no qualms about killing or maiming. More, he knew Slater wouldn't dare interfere. Even though Slater was a power in the community, Brannigan's word, backed by his woods tough, was still law.

Davey eyed the big man warily as he advanced. His right arm half-useless from the terrible twisting Brannigan had given it last night, and his whole body sore and tired, he knew that luck would have to be with him. He was nervous, but not afraid. And there was a grim feeling running through him that this was the show down. One or the other of them wasn't going to leave this mill dock alive.

Davey stood his ground, studying Brannigan, trying to keep his mind clear and cool, trying to figure a way that would help him win. Cutting the man's face wasn't enough, this time. It had to be something more deadly than that.

Brannigan suddenly crouched, then sprang. One of his booted feet lashed out ahead of him. The wicked, needle-sharp caulks in the boot sole shone bright as they flashed up towards Davey's belly. If they had landed they would have disembowled him.

But Davey twisted, moved sideways, took the boot on his thigh. The caulks slashed a path of ribbons in his pants, seared across his skin like tiger's claws.

He made a grab for Brannigan's head with his good arm. But the big man was too quick. He ducked, swung around, dived for Davey's middle, head down, one shoulder slightly ahead of the other.

It took Davey before he could recover from the sideways twist. Brannigan's shoulder seemed to smash through clear to his back bone, knocking the wind from him and sending a shock wave of pain through him.

They went down in a flying heap, Brannigan clawing with his great paws for Davey's throat. Davey managed to pull one of his knees up under Brannigan, heaved up with all of his might. Brannigan's hands came free of his neck and he fell heavily.

Instantly, Davey rolled over on him, circled Brannigan's neck with his arm, shoved a knee in his back. Teeth gritting, he started levering back Brannigan's head.

Brannigan squealed, more in fear than pain, for Davey's hold held him pinned to the ground and in a good way to get his neck broken. He thrashed violently, but couldn't dislodge Davey. His breath was coming in labored gasps. Suddenly he quit thrashing, went limp. Slowly, Davey relaxed his hold, got to his knees.

With a sudden heave, Brannigan rolled over, having merely been putting on an act to get Davey loose. He pulled the gun from his belt as he rolled.

Davey lashed at him before he could level the gun. Its blast shattered at Davey's right ear, seemed to put a heavy vacuum in one side of his head, but his hands were on the gun, twisting, pulling, jerking. One of his hands was locked on Brannigan's wrist and, try as he could, Brannigan couldn't twist the gun enough to make it bear on Davey.

Their bodies were almost still as they locked in a struggle for the gun. Davey was tiring against Brannigan's greater strength and felt his hold slipping.

Suddenly the gun was jerked free from his hands. Frantically, he raised his fist six inches, slammed it down on Brannigan's wrist.

The gun jumped. The report was muffled. Brannigan's whole body jerked, went slack.

DAVEY crawled to his feet, looking down. A red stain was spreading over Brannigan's shirt front and he sat there gazing down at it stupidly. Then, slowly, the big man started climbing to his feet. He fell back once, but made it on the second try. He stood there swaying, his eyes following the course of the blood down his shirt front. Davey could see where the bullet had entered, right over Brannigan's heart and he wondered how the man could go on living, much less get to his feet.

Suddenly Brannigan roared, raised the gun, fired point blank at Davey.

Davey felt the slug tear through his shirt, sear across the skin of his neck. He struck out blindly, hit Brannigan square in the face.

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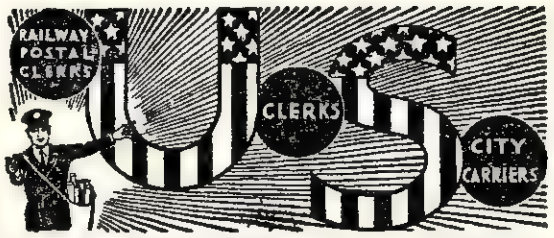

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The big man stumbled backwards, fell over the stringer at the dock's edge. He dropped the gun, caught at the stringer as he went over the side. For several seconds he hung there—long enough for Davey to step to the edge and look down. Then, slowly, the great, hairy fingers relaxed, slipped away from the stringer. There was a loud splash, then a quiet that seemed to beat at Davey's ears.

Hell Well turned away, his eyes studying something on the nearby hillside intently. "I, for one, didn't see him hit the drink," he muttered.

Davey sat down on the stringer, his knees suddenly shaky. A heavy weariness was settling down on him, loss of sleep and the hard use his body had been put to beginning to fog his mind. He closed his eyes, feeling like he could sleep a week.

He heard voices, knew one was a woman's, but was too weary to look up. During the last of the fight a light carriage had come tearing down the dock at a dangerously mad clip. Now, a slip of a girl and an old man climbed out. The girl lifted her long skirt in one hand, ran toward Davey.

It was Martha, and her face was ghostly white. Fear made her eyes entirely beautiful. She stopped a few paces from Davey, her lips quivering a little.

"Davey . . . Davey . . . !" she said fearfully.

His head jerked up. His eyes went wide. He saw her gasp with relief, saw the color start to flow back into her cheeks. He got to his feet, went toward her as if in a daze.

There was a mixture of emotion in her eyes that puzzled him. "Davey . . ." she said haltingly. "Thee should not have let him drown."

"He was dead before he hit the water," Davey said dully and he was surprised to find that his arms were reaching out, bringing her to him. He kissed her hard.

She pulled away. "And thee should not have done that, Davey. We are not yet betrothed."

Davey thought, *I'll fix that.* He reached out for her again. "Will you marry me?" he asked, the words tumbling out fast.

Martha didn't have to make up her mind. Her arms slid up around his neck and her lips yielded to his battered ones.

THE END

Out Trail Caravan

SPRING thaw was in the air, and the Ole Ranger was again standing in our doorway a fresh bunch of manuscripts clenched in his range-browned paw.

"Wa'll younker," he said genially, "here I am again. Take that story of how Captain Andy Bennett kept the red varmints in tow, brings to mind when I was a co'poral in the same outfit."

"You, in the Cavalry?" we echoed.

"I remember," Ole Ranger nodded, his blue eyes gleaming with humor, "one time, we went out on patrol, around twenty o' us, headed by a captain named Gordon."

"After host-iles, we was. Story was they were about 100 strong, headed by a cantankerous troublemaker named King Jack, named after a hand in poker I guess.

"One day, we caught about five of the red devils settin' upon a trader, who was pushin' to make Dry Gulch before dark. They was ridin' around, whoopin', firing away, and that old trader was a banging away with his Sharps. He hit two an' near blew them to smithereens. The other three, took off across the Mesquite like frightened jack-rabbits.

"Trader Joe, turned out to be a rainmaker besides selling his grub, pots and pans—and bad whiskey. And there's the story.

"About a week later we got wind of a big Injun party with ideas on cutting up the whole mining settlement at Dry Gulch. Captain Gordon heard they was gatherin' not far from Dry Gulch, at a place called Rainy Canyon, so-called because it hadn't

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rained there in the memory of man. We got fresh mounts, took along extry ammunition, plenty o' sowbelly and hard tack, and the twenty of us rode up towards the Canyon, hopin' to cut them off at its mouth. We danged near got to the Canyon but one of their scouts spotted us.

"Shorter than it takes to skin a rabbit, them savages were circling us. The bullets flying like hailstones now. I looked up from behind my dead cayuse, and comin' up the trail was old Trader Joe whuppin' the daylights out o' his mules, his ol' wagon rockin' like the wheels were a coming off. That dingblasted fool rode right through the redskins, who were as surprised as we were, right into the middle of our circle. 'You-all saved my scalp I guess, so I think I'll return the favor,' he told us.

"We looked at him like he was plumb loco. But he waren't. He got out some long sticks from the back of his wagon, ignoring the bullets and began to mumble to hisself and, then, doggone if a great black cloud didn't roll up out of the Canyon, and the rain began to come down like I never hope to see again.

"We couldn't see the Injuns and they couldn't see us. Pretty soon this rain begins to pour and flood out o' the Canyon. Trader Joe, while this was goin' on had been blowin' up sheeps bladders big as balloons, and then went around to hand them to each sojer. A flood of water came roaring out of Rainy Canyon, swept all of us back toward Dry Gulch, and drowned every last one of them danged Injuns. So-long, Sonny."

After the old-timer left, we picked up the stories he had brought back. Some of them were missing, and pages of others had apparently been used as pipe cleaners. But the best of the lot, a novel and three novelettes that we guessed the Ole Ranger had liked were still intact. And together with a bunch of other fiction we've rounded up, they'll be in the May issue—printed on March 28th.

See you then!

—The Editor.

(Continued from page 77)

in the glass that the Colonel was watching him like a cat, with the gun pointed square at his back. Any false move like making a break for the back door, and O'Tooligan knew Honest Ike would shoot him down, noise or no noise.

Pistol Pete reached up under his Stetson, and without the Colonel seeing what his hand was doing, felt for the holster hanging under the hat. It carried the .22 Colt target pistol that O'Tooligan had made famous on theater stages throughout the West.

The Stetson came off the hook, balanced on the end of Pistol Pete's hidden gun barrel. Looking up into the mirror, O'Tooligan checked the angle of fire and then he squeezed off a shot backwards over his right shoulder, smack through the crown of his forty-dollar sombrero.

Colonel Krutch let out a squall like a tomcat with its tail caught in a door, and the big Colt clattered to the floor. His wrist was drilled clean through by Pistol Pete's slug.

"A little trick done with mirrors," O'Tooligan said, turning around, "that I used to feature when I was behind the footlights. Maybe you remember my act, Colonel?"

You could have knocked off Marshal Baldy Munroe's eyeballs with a stick when Pistol Pete O'Tooligan sashayed into the Silver Dime Saloon a few minutes later. He was herding Colonel Krutch, minus his wig and his derby, with blood dribbling from his bullet smashed hand.

"The slippery son busted jail, eh?" yells the marshal, clapping his handcuffs on

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Krutch's good wrist. "Can't them Rangers hang onto a man long enough to string him up?"

Then O'Tooligan dropped his bombshell.

"This Colonel Krutch who was arrested by the Rangers was named Honest Abe," he said. "He was a dead ringer for his brother Ike, here, except Abe had a thick head of hair cut pompadour style whereas Ike is as bald as a barrelhead.

"Honest Ike here would drift into a town on a Saturday night and set the stage by making modest bets with his hair-restorer customers, and then would retire for the night. Before daylight he'd slip out of town and Honest Abe would take his place,

"So he busted jail, eh?"

wearin' identical clothes. According to the Rangers, that pair has robbed banks from Tulsa to Tucson, with that hair-restorer swindle. So Longhorn City don't have any monopoly on morons."

That made Marshal Baldy Monroe flush, but he was game.

"You talk like you knew them skunks before?" he said.

O'Tooligan grinned sheepishly.

"I did," he confessed, "but it took me a long time to figger out where. Ten years ago, Honest Abe and Honest Ike were doing an acrobatic tumbling act on the same bill that I was doing my trick shooting routine on, over in New Orleans. They went by the name of the Tumbleweed Twins."

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